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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, Editor

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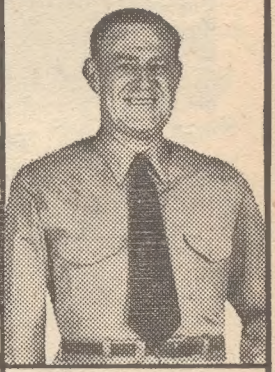

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The Chuck Wagon

FUGITIVE FRONTIERSMAN

By Nell Murbarger

WHEN Caleb Greenwood parlayed a murder charge into miles, he laid the foundation for a lifetime of adventure and danger, and eventual recognition as one of the greatest Western frontiersmen of all time.

Presumably destined to a life of ease and security as the son of a prosperous Virginia planter of Colonial English stock, young Caleb's career had taken a sudden turn on that day in 1781 when a deputy sheriff appeared at the Greenwood mansion and seized upon an ancient slave to satisfy what the Greenwoods considered an unjust writ of attachment.

When verbal protests failed to effect release of the old slave, a torrent of invectives had been exchanged—a tirade brought to shattering conclusion when the impetuous 18-year-old Caleb had whipped out a pistol and with it shot and killed the deputy.

Shadow of the Gallows

With the looming shadow of the gallows lying heavily across his heart, Caleb's father had advised the youth to put all possible distance between himself and Virginia, and, to further that escape, had given the boy one thousand dollars in cash, a good rifle, and the best horse in the Greenwood stables.

When he fled his home state in the dark of night on that unnamed date in 1781, young Caleb's immediate destination has never been definitely established. Two years later, however, found him in St. Louis, then still a possession of France, and but for the Spanish missions, the farthest Western outpost of civilization.

Marries Indian Maiden

For nearly a quarter of a century, Caleb is known to have lived in and around St. Louis; but so far as details of his life are concerned, those years remain a complete blank. Since virtually every man then residing in that vicinity gained his livelihood either directly or indirectly from the fur trade, it may be assumed that Caleb, too, followed this pursuit.

Sometime between 1807 and 1813, when Caleb was nudging the half-century mark,

[*Turn to page 8*]

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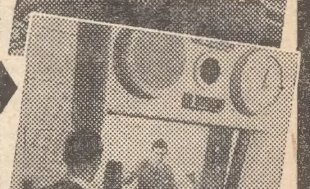

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romantic interest entered his life—apparently for the first time. The object of his affection was a young girl of the Crow Indian nation—a girl one-third his age, who would subsequently bear him seven children, and throughout her days would serve him as a loyal and faithful wife.

After his marriage, the aging trapper and mountain man seems to have remained with his wife's people for possibly ten years or more, the next recorded mention of his name not occurring until 1822, when he is listed as a member of the William H. Ashley fur-trading expedition to the Rocky Mountains.

The Rockies, at that time, were wild, rough, and virtually unexplored; a virgin territory beset by savage Indians and unknown dangers. The fact that only daring young adventurers of stout heart and strong physique were being sought as members of that expedition, speaks eloquently for the recognized worth of "Old Greenwood," as he had come to be known. Even at 60 years, the Virginia-born frontiersman still could outride and outshoot any man a fraction his age.

In 1838, with the hoariness of 75 years settled in his hair and beard, Caleb's young Indian wife had passed to a better world, leaving him a legacy of seven halfbreed children—the youngest a baby of only seven months.

For the next five years the old trapper lived in and around St. Louis, supporting and caring for his family, and all the while eating his heart out to be back on the trail. With the marriage of his eldest son, the old man thankfully relinquished to him the task of feeding and housing the younger children; and with demanding duty cast from his shoulders like a ragged cloak, this incredible octogenarian began looking for new worlds to conquer.

Pathfinder

The day of the fur trapper was largely ended, and many of Greenwood's strong young comrades of the Ashley expedition were already in their graves. Of them all, only Greenwood seemed imperishable, and the age of 81 years found him embarking on what was to be the most important phase of his entire career—that of pathfinder to the emigrants.

In that year of 1844, when Greenwood accepted the near-to-impossible assignment of guiding the Stevens-Townsend-Murphy wagon train from the Mississippi River to Sutter's Fort, no wheeled vehicle had ever before crossed the Sierra into California.

Drawing either upon an uncanny intuition or a vast store of pre-knowledge, Greenwood led the members of his party across 2000-odd miles of wild, savage-infested country, guiding them infallibly.

That Greenwood's choice of routes was unassailable may be seen from the fact that this route he pioneered from Fort Hall, Idaho, to Fort Sutter, in California, was fated to become the most historic highway in America—a road followed by virtually every California-bound emigrant for the next quarter of a century! In the year, 1850, alone, more than 50,000 persons followed the trail blazed by the old Virginian.

Donner Relief Party

Greenwood's last big undertaking—and one of the most grueling and spectacular of his entire career—took place during the hard winter of 1847 when the 84-year-old frontiersman led a relief expedition through 60-foot snowdrifts to carry food to the starving Donner party, which had earlier spurned his advice to follow that of the more persuasive Lansford Hastings.

It was while hunting deer in the mountains near Oroville, California, that death overtook Caleb Greenwood in his 91st year.

He died as he had lived, lying under the stars and the open sky, wrapped in a buffalo-skin robe, with his old rifle at his side. Found by a group of passing miners, the old man was laid to rest under the pines—but if his grave ever was marked, it has not been so in the memory of living men, and apparently no one knows today where his body lies.

In repayment for cheating the gallows in his youth, Caleb Greenwood had given 73 years of courageous service to the Winning of the West.

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NIGHTRIDERS'

A Novel by RAY TOWNSEND

It was literally a powder keg that Jim Sheridan sat on as the hard-bitten ramrod tried to avert a bloody range war

CHAPTER I

No Proof

JIM SHERIDAN rode into Basin City from the empty, dark land beyond. Not until he saw the liveliness in the cowtown's brightly lighted main street did he realize that he had forgotten this was Saturday night. But the shifting flow of traffic was only an added irritant to the deep, burning anger within him.

He was a big man, Sheridan, with straight dark brows that made a frowning, horizontal line above the sharp-angled planes of his face. He nodded briefly and from habit to several peo-

The two guns exploded simultaneously

ple in rigs and on the walk, but did not rein in until he found his way deliberately blocked by a dark-haired girl astride a magnificent chestnut gelding.

"Well, Mr. Sheridan!" She sat straight in the saddle as she stared at him angrily. "I was beginning to think you had left the country for good. But I don't suppose it matters to you if I ride into town unescorted! Or, for that matter, I suppose—"

"Not now, Eve." Sheridan's voice was tired. For a moment he regarded this daughter of his former employer, this girl who now was his employer herself. He said, "Johnny Watkins was shot today. Shot in the back, outside the cabin at Government Meadow."

Eve Hammond gasped, the angry glint fading quickly from her eyes. Hers was a nature of swift changes. She rode up beside him, laying a hand upon his arm.

"Was it Bishop, Jim?" Her eyes were wide, meeting his.

He did not answer. From the corner of his eye he saw Ozzie Gilman, Eve's top-hand, swing down before the Longhorn Saloon and realized that Ozzie had ridden to town with Eve Hammond. Impatient, he said, "Later, Eve. I've got to see a man."

As he moved away she called to him, "Tell Dane not to stay at that poker table all night, Jim! And I don't want him wobbly drunk at the dance, either, understand?"

Sheridan dismounted before the rack at the Longhorn Saloon. It was ironical to him that Eve Hammond could be more disturbed about Dane Carter's state of sobriety than by the murder of one of her own men. But, after all, was that unusual for Eve? More than most men he should know by now how little most things meant to Eve.

FOR ten years Sheridan had ridden for the Diamond spread. Ten years under old Hank, foreman of the Diamond now, under Eve. He gave a brief thought to old Hank, Eve's father, and of how that old-timer would have reacted had one of his men been shot down in cold blood. But Hank Hammond had been dead for two years.

Sheridan put both father and daughter from his mind as he stepped up to Ozzie Gilman in front of the Longhorn Saloon.

Ozzie was the faithful one. Little sandy-haired Ozzie, as loyal as Jim's own right hand. Ozzie had been on the Diamond nearly as long as Sheridan himself, a dry little man who considered most conversation the pastime of fools. Nor did he speak now as he turned in behind the Diamond foreman and entered the Longhorn.

Sheridan had noticed the three Bar B mounts at the rack outside, and he was not surprised, as his gaze traveled over the room, to see Dane Carter seated at a poker table with Lou Bishop and two of his men. He walked directly to the table, stopping a yard behind one of Lou's men.

The buzz of conversation in the room died down. Ozzie Gilman circled unobtrusively to a spot beyond the table where Bishop and Carter sat.

A full minute passed before Lou Bishop glanced up, meeting Jim Sheridan's eyes. Jim did not miss the tightening of the heavy muscle that corded the man's thick neck, the quickly controlled start of surprise. But the man's smile, showing strong, white teeth beneath the black line of mustache he wore, was immediate. Dane Carter, not seeing Sheridan, cursed and threw in his hand, reaching for the bottle on the floor beside his chair.

Bishop said, "Well, well, if it ain't the big man in person. Hi, ranny! Been putting your cows to bed?"

"Jim!" Carter looked up, seeing Sheridan then, and frowning, both in pretense at seeing the foreman, and in genuine ill humor at his luck. "About time you got here, feller! Sit in this damned game and see if you can't help things a little! I've lost enough already tonight to buy this damned place twice over!"

But for the moment Sheridan ignored him, his gaze steady on the cynical, mocking Lou Bishop's face.

"I don't see your boy Dirk in town, Lou," Sheridan said quietly. "Don't you have the guts to do your own dirty work

any more?"

At these words, the last murmur of conversation in the room faded out. Bishop's eyes narrowed, his smile was set, but he did not come up from his chair.

"You talk in riddles, friend," he drawled. "Dirk Jeffers is no boy of mine, and you know it. I'd say it was downright unfriendly of you to accuse me of having to do with anything he may have done."

The man's precisely careful speech goaded the anger in the Diamond foreman. Abruptly he strode around the table and jerked Bishop from his chair. He spoke directly into the man's face, the suspicion and distrust that had been building within him for more than a year now a cold fury in his tone.

"Johnny Watkins was killed—murdered—today, Bishop! Half the stock in Government Meadow was driven down into the badlands! This was your work, or Jeffers's! And if Dirk Jeffers did it, it was because you ordered it done! We'll catch Jeffers at one of his tricks some day and he'll hang. And when he does, Bishop, you'll be hanging right beside him!"

Lou Bishop was a heavy man. Though an inch or two shorter than Jim Sheridan, he was broad and long of body. His shoulders and chest were wide and deep, layered with the muscle of an active, vigorous life. Though caught momentarily off-balance by Jim's quick move, Bishop kicked over the chair behind him now, settling more squarely upon his feet. The chair made a clatter in the heavy silence of the saloon.

LOU BISHOP'S smile widened. He glanced down at the fists hovering before his shirt front, let his eyes travel slowly up to Sheridan's face.

"You're a wild man, Jim," he said easily. "And you rile easy, but you're only a ramrod in this man's country. If you want to make this personal between us, make your move now or any time. If not, step back and take your hands away from me. I'd hate to kill a man who wasn't ready to draw!"

For tense moments the two stood face to face. Both were dark—dark with sun, and black of hair and eyes. There was hatred in each, livid hatred for each other. But Jim Sheridan's hatred was plain and unveiled in his face and in his eyes. Lou Bishop covered his with a satirical smile. Hatred in this man was a devious, complicated emotion, as were each of the actions and motives that dictated the life of the owner of the Bar B Ranch.

Jim's lack of proof against the man abruptly rose before him, and he realized the futility of his accusation. He knew only that Johnny Watkins was dead, and that Diamond stock had been deliberately driven into the wilderness maze of eroded badlands south of Government Meadow. And although he knew in his heart that Dirk Jeffers was responsible, was positive there was an agreement between Jeffers, the owlhoot, and Bishop, the rancher, his lack of proof held him helpless in spite of his anger.

Jim Sheridan dropped his hands from Lou Bishop, stepped back a pace.

"You can tell Dirk for me that his time is getting short, Bishop," he said. "I'll be riding by his shack up on the bench some day soon—and if he's smart he won't be there!"

The owner of the Bar B did not answer. Sheridan turned slowly, seeing the intentness of Dane Carter's face across the table. Ozzie Gilman stood beyond, gun drawn, holding two of Bishop's men steady near the wall. As the Diamond foreman glanced toward the crowded bar he saw men turning back to their drinks. He nodded at Ozzie and the little tophand backed away from the Bar B men, following his boss to the door.

At the last moment Dane Carter called to Sheridan and came unsteadily to his feet, weaving after Ozzie and Jim. They moved outside together, three who had long been friends.

As they moved down the street, Dane Carter was the first to speak.

"Sorry about Watkins, Jim. But don't you think you're pushing Lou pretty hard? Hell, I've lost a few head of Pothook stuff, too. But I'd think twice before I'd jump

Lou Bishop about it, and that's for sure!"

In the semi-darkness of the street Sheridan looked at Dane Carter. He said, "Yes. Yes, you would think twice, Dane. Maybe that's part of what's wrong."

Dane Carter was a big man himself, looming inches above Ozzie Gilman there on the walk. There was a growing softness about him, however, that did not escape Sheridan. Dane lived too well, lived too easy, and hit the liquor far too hard. He was unsteady on his feet at this moment, a handsome, blond, and usually smiling man, frowning now at the implication in Sheridan's words.

But before he could speak Jim said, "Eve is in town, Dane. She'll be expecting you to take her to the dance."

Eve usually rode to town with Jim to meet Dane, since Carter's small Pothook spread was on the far side of the valley from the Diamond headquarters.

Carter's mood lightened abruptly. He laughed.

"Still doing chores for Eve, eh, Jim? And I guess she gave you orders to keep me sober, eh?" He turned, glancing back at the Longhorn. "Hell, it's still early. Eve can wait. That's what women are for, ain't it? Me, I need a drink." He laughed again and said, "See you boys later," and turned back to the saloon.

OZZIE GILMAN murmured, "I don't like it, Jim. Dane's not the boy he was. And the Pothook's mighty close to the Bar B, if you ask me." He added softly, "Maybe too close, if you know what I mean."

Sheridan's frowning glance touched Ozzie's face. For a moment he considered what the little tophand had said, then grinned, clapping Ozzie upon the back.

"Don't be a damned fool, son. You were always a great one for seeing bears on a rabbit hunt. Dane's maybe a little foolish now and then, but he's as straight as they come."

He moved on toward the hotel then, leaving Ozzie standing there watching him. The tow-haired little rider glanced once more at the swinging doors through which Carter had disappeared and moved off toward the stable, muttering in the night,

"Straight as they come, maybe, but I wouldn't draw cards to that straight."

CHAPTER II

Cross Purposes

HENRY TAYLOR'S voice stopped Sheridan as he walked up onto the porch of the Virginia Hotel. Glancing along the veranda he saw the man's thatch of white hair and the glowing end of his cigar in the dark. Answering the summons, he took a chair beside the elderly rancher.

The old man spoke calmly in a voice that was cultured and gentle. He brought to mind the deep South—Georgia, the Carolinas on a balmy night like this. Around Henry Taylor was the spirit of the past, as from another world. Jim Sheridan was fond of the old man, the owner of the Rocking Chair spread, but could not reconcile any man living in the past and finding satisfaction with the present, too.

Henry Taylor was living proof, however, that a man can live in but one generation, for he was happy only when reminiscing about the past. Faced with today's problems, Taylor invariably became confused and vague, which brought indecision and discontent. Upon Mike Durand, Henry Tayor's square-jawed, quiet foreman, fell the full responsibility of operating the Rocking Chair. And the old man's daughter, Anne, somehow coped with the problem of making her father's life effortless and simple.

But now, as Jim Sheridan sat listening to Henry Taylor's talk of other days, reality moved in, in the shape of Mike Durand and two of the old man's ranch neighbors —Tom McCulley and Frank Alberson who walked over from the Longhorn together

and stepped up on the porch.

"Good evening, gentlemen." If Taylor was sorry for the interruption it was covered by his natural courtesy. "Shall we have refreshments sent out? It is pleasant here this evening."

Sheridan had said nothing of the shooting of Watkins to Taylor, nor had he mentioned his suspicions of Bishop and Jeffers. The old man would have had nothing helpful today. Tom McCulley, however, was not a man to care overmuch for either the inadequacies or sensibilities of another. Pushing ahead of the others as they came along the porch, he stopped directly before Sheridan.

"When we going to run them coyotes out of the country, Jim?" he demanded. "Between our three outfits we muster twice the men Bishop and Jeffers have together. The quicker, the sooner, I say! And tonight's as good a time as any!"

McCulley was a weighty, round-faced man whose impatience, Sheridan had often thought, sprang more for a desire for violence than from any compulsion for justice. McCulley and his partner, Alberson, owned the Circle M. Though the two men had moved into Smoke River Valley only three years ago, McCulley, the more aggressive of the pair, had been quick to ally their Circle M with the Diamond and the Rocking Chair spreads. Almost too quick, Sheridan had thought, on occasion.

Studying the man now, Jim Sheridan again wondered idly about the reasons for McCulley's outbursts. Of course reports of missing stock had been becoming more and more frequent. At the last account, Mike Durand had reported nearly as many head missing from Henry Taylor's herds as Jim had tallied short on the Diamond. It was not unreasonable that McCulley, whose Circle M was closer to Lou Bishop's Bar B spread than either of the other two, should report an even greater loss.

The eagerness of Tom McCulley to enlist the aid of the Rocking Chair and the Diamond brought a faint suspicion to Sheridan. As much as he hated and distrusted Lou Bishop, as sure as he was that the rancher was backing Jeffers in stripping the valley herds, he still wanted to proceed cautiously. He had no wish to precipitate open war in the valley without absolute proof of guilt. McCulley was too eager to start something.

Jim thought of the wide rolling range land and the lush mountain meadows over which Lou Bishop's cattle now grazed. And could not help but realize how much better off McCulley and Alberson would be if they could spread their own stock out over Bar B range.

HE WONDERED about McCulley. It might not be beyond such a man as McCulley deliberately to provoke a war for his own private purposes.

He said flatly, "There's the matter of proof, McCulley. We may be absolutely sure in our own minds that Jeffers is stealing us blind and be just as sure that Dirk is one of Lou Bishop's hired hands. But we've never actually caught Jeffers rustling a single head of stock. Nor, for that matter, have we any proof of a tieup between Dirk and Lou."

"But good Lord, man! Dirk Jeffers has been camping up on the bench above Bishop's for over a year! The shanty he lives in belongs to Bishop! And it's Bishop's range he rides—when it's not ours! Bishop lets Jeffers and his rannies live up there without question. And he defends the damned owlhoot every time anybody says a word against him!"

From the corner of his eye Sheridan noticed the look of distaste upon Henry Taylor's face. The old Southerner always shied away from all mention of violence.

"I think we should pay Jeffers a visit anyway, Jim," Frank Alberson, McCulley's partner, said, his tone less belligerent. Alberson, older man than his partner, was a homely man who looked lank and awkward in the ill-fitting store clothes he wore for his Saturday night in town.

"Even if we have to let Lou Bishop get by a while longer," he urged, "I think this Jeffers matter is pretty open and shut. Our losses are getting heavier than I like to see." He glanced self-consciously at

Henry Taylor before adding, "Durand here says the same about the Rocking Chair."

The apparent honesty in this man several times before had allayed Sheridan's suspicions of Tom McCulley. McCulley, alone, he would not have trusted. But Alberson had all the earmarks of being conscientious. Jim was wondering how the two had ever come to be partners when abruptly Henry Taylor came to his feet.

"I'll not have it!" he barked. Sheridan stared in surprise as the old man shook his fist in the faces of the other men. "I'll not have it, understand? And you, Durand—I'll have no more talk of shooting and killing as long as you remain in my employ! The Rocking Chair, sirs, will have no part in your cowardly undertakings! If you take the law into your own hands and shed blood, the responsibility will be yours alone!"

Turning, the old rancher strode in dignity to the hotel door, pausing there a moment to look back. The thick white hair and the starched front of his shirt gleamed whitely in the light from the lobby. Still held with surprise by the sudden outburst, Jim Sheridan could not help but think once more that here was a man who was still living by the codes and mores of an era that had died with the defeat of Lee's armies nearly a generation before.

"Come along, Durand!" the old man ordered. "I'll have a word with you in private!"

But as the rancher turned to the door again he was stopped on the threshold by the appearance of his daughter, Anne, and Eve Hammond, who stepped from the lobby side by side.

Both girls were dressed for the dance at Odd Fellows Hall. Eve's low-cut gown showed the full curve of her breasts. It was a daring gown and that she knew it was shown by the way her glance went to the men on the porch. Eve Hammond always demanded that the charms of which she was so fully aware should bring appreciation to the eyes of men.

Anne, taller than Eve, possessed a pale, golden beauty that made a more languorous bid for attention than did that of the raven-haired girl. Anne Taylor had inherited her father's stature and slenderness, and more than a little of his forthright pride. The pale dress she wore, though more modest than Eve's, accented the feminine lines of the body it adorned. The contrast between the two girls held each man on the porch in silent admiration.

ANNE sensed at once that something unpleasant had passed between the men. Her smile faded as she looked at her father.

"Father! What is it?" She laid a hand upon Henry Taylor's arm.

"Go upstairs and change that dress, girl! We're riding back to the Rocking Chair!"

Henry Taylor stalked past his daughter and into the lobby. Anne's eyes widened, touching each of the men. Her glance settled on Sheridan and she stepped toward him.

"Jim, what is it? You didn't say anything to upset Father, did you?" But as she spoke she sought her answer in the faces of all three men.

That she had spoken to Jim Sheridan instead of to Mike Durand, however, had escaped none of them, least of all Jim himself. For Sheridan knew, as did everyone in the valley, the feeling the Rocking Chair foreman had for his employer's daughter.

Although he was ten years older than Sheridan, it was no secret to anyone that Mike Durand was deeply in love with Anne Taylor. Foreman of the Rocking Chair for fifteen years, Durand had watched her grow to maturity under his protection, since his word was law on her father's ranch. No one knew, however, if he had even spoken to Anne of his feelings, nor if she herself was aware of his affection for her. Durand, a hard-faced man, lanky and quiet, was hardly a man to capture a young girl's dreams.

Now, as Anne stood there, Jim Sheridan was strongly aware of Mike Durand's jealousy, and of the ill will that was building up in the Rocking Chair foreman. The man's stare made Jim uncomfortable.

He said, "Nothing's wrong, Anne. Or will be. Don't worry."

Mike Durand said, "You'd better come along, Anne. Your father is waiting." He waited deliberately, his gaze striking hard at Sheridan over Anne's shoulder.

There was actually a feeling of pity in Jim for the man; of regret, as well. How could he tell Durand that he did not love Anne, that there was no need for worry on his account? But for that matter, how could he tell this to Anne?

She was looking up at him, disappointment plain in her eyes.

"Oh, Jim, the dance!"

"Another time, Anne." Sheridan smiled at her. His feeling of guilt was strong.

The girl rode forward, now showing some fear

This was something he had long avoided, this look in Anne Taylor's eyes. As she stood before him, her eager offer of her love was plain and there was so little he could offer in return.

Henry Taylor's voice barked angrily from inside the hotel,

"Durand!"

"Better come along, Anne," the foreman insisted. And with a final pressure upon the Diamond foreman's arm Anne Taylor turned and preceded Durand inside.

Looking along the shadowy porch, Sheridan saw the pale outline of Eve's shoulders in the gloom. Knowing her as he did, he could sense her mood. His own spirits lightened as he moved toward her. He laughed.

"You want the whole world at your feet,

don't you, kid? Well, go ahead and pout. It might do you good, at that.

She swung abruptly to face him, eyes glinting with the anger he knew would be there.

"Damn you, Jim Sheridan. You don't have to be so smug!"

"Serve you right if I married her tomorrow, you little minx!"

"Go ahead and try it! Mike Durand would run you out of the country at the end of a sixgun if you did!"

HE LAUGHED again, then pretended to consider the matter in a serious vein.

"Might be worth a try, at that," he said. "Anne's a lovely girl."

"I hate her! I hate her!" Suddenly she was beating at him, slamming her fists in sharp tattoo against his chest. "And I hate you, too, Jim Sheridan! I hate you, do you understand?"

Jim roared with laughter. He grabbed her to him in a bear hug that effectually stopped her blows. She went limp against him, her body a soft warmth against his own.

"Jim—Jim, I couldn't stand it if you married Anne!"

Abruptly the humor drained from Jim. For months now he had thought himself immune from these quick, stabbing pains of sheer futility. He thought he had cured himself of the feeling he'd had for Eve. Even now he would not admit to himself how his pulses were racing, and his swift desire for her as he held her in his arms. He gritted his teeth, forced himself to smile as he pushed her away.

"But Dane?" he asked easily. "What about Dane, Eve?"

There was only one answer to this. Jim knew all too well what that answer would be.

Eve straightened, the threat of tears in her eyes. But she lifted her chin and looked at him with a feminine determination.

"Yes," she said. "Dane." She drew a deep breath. "I can't help it, Jim. No more than I can help breathing. I can't help Dane's being what he is in my life, and that's all there is to it!"

"Somebody taking my name in vain—I hope not?"

Dane Carter's soft, humorous laughter swung them both around. Dane stood in the doorway, grinning into the shadows. A lock of curly blond hair hung down above one eye. He was unsteady upon his feet.

In Jim Sheridan's eyes Dane Carter was a half-drunk, overgrown boy, but he also had been his friend through half a lifetime. Dane, Ozzie, and Jim—these three had been inseparable in times gone by. But two years ago a windfall had come to Dane—a small inheritance from a relative in the East. He had quit the Diamond, starting his own Pothook brand with the three hundred head he had bought from Hank Hammond shortly before the old man died. He also had asked Eve Hammond to marry him and she had accepted, in spite of the understanding that had existed between herself and Jim Sheridan even since she had been in her very early teens.

Now, as they stood on the porch of the Virginia Hotel, Sheridan deliberately ignored the thrust of memory. He told himself that the feeling he'd had for Eve *was* dead, gone as the years were gone. Dane was the fair-haired boy, the man she had finally chosen when she was old enough to know her own mind, and there was nothing he could do.

"Somebody said I could find a woman around here." Dane was clowning, like a small boy who was sure he could get his own way. "A dark-haired gal who says she wants to dance."

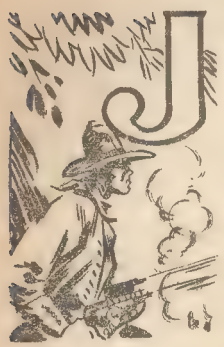
Eve left Jim without speaking. She took Dane Carter's arm and the two of them moved side by side slowly toward the porch steps.

"Coming, Jim?" Dane paused before stepping down. "Might give you the loan of my woman for a jig or two."

"Later." Jim nodded, but Eve did not look back. "I'll be along later." And he stood in the shadows of the porch, watching them go.

CHAPTER III

Suspicion—and a Friend



JIM SHERIDAN stepped down from saddle, moving up through the timber to the edge of the small meadow ahead. The first gray light of dawn filtered through the rising, wisplike fog on the meadow. A small cabin and a crude log corral appeared insubstantial, bathed in the morning mist. There was no light at the windows, nor any sign of life about yard or corral.

Behind Jim, Ozzie Gilman cursed. Frank Alberson moved up, speaking in a guarded tone.

"Still abed, maybe. Let's have a look-see."

But there was no one in the cabin, nor anywhere around the place. Grub and utensils were on shelves and unwashed dishes on the pine table in the center of the room. Sheridan crossed over and put his hand on the stove.

"Dirk and his boys were here last night," he said. "Late last night."

He glanced at the slight figure of Ozzie Gilman, who stood in the doorway. Alberson was still outside.

"I don't like it, Jim." The little top-hand's voice held an undertone of resentment. "Jeffers and Bishop have both been too many jumps ahead of us all this year." He added softly, "I'd say it's a lot more than just luck."

Sheridan knew what he meant. As he walked out he shook his head at the gray haired Alberson.

"We've had our ride for nothing, Frank. Maybe another time."

But what Ozzie had said stayed in Jim Sheridan's mind. Dane. Dane Carter, was what Ozzie had been saying, as plainly as though he had spoken the name.

Dane had been at the Diamond the night before. He had known that Alberson was joining Jim and Ozzie to visit the Jeffers shack this morning. Sheridan had asked Dane to come along. But Carter had hedged, and after bidding Eve good night had ridden back early to his Pothook spread.

What was it with Dane? But how many times had Jim asked himself this identical question? It was certain that Ozzie no longer felt bound by the friendship ties that once had bound the three men. Ozzie no longer considered Dane Carter a friend.

Dropping downtrail from the timbered heights, Sheridan realized that should things keep up as they were going, he himself would be forced to make a decision where Dane Carter was concerned. He chewed upon the thought now, without appetite, giving the gelding its head as they dropped down a ridge toward the valley floor.

The path of least resistance. That always had been Dane's way. Yet Jim could overlook Dane's wildness, his gambling, drinking and unpredictability if it wasn't for Dane's engagement to Eve. After all, a man did not pick his friends for the virtues and good qualities they possessed. But what about Eve? To what could such a union lead? There was sudden discomfort in the memory of Hank Hammond's words as the rancher had lain on his deathbed two years before.

"I'd liked to have seen you my son, Jim," the old man had said. "But it's Eve's choice, not mine." He had pushed irritably against his covers and added impatiently, "By thunder, I just hope I've raised the girl to be strong enough to stand by her own mistakes!"

Why had Eve and Dane waited two long years? Why had they not been married long before now? Dane was drinking and gambling more, instead of less because of the delay. Impatience suddenly seized Jim Sheridan, impatience and a deep sense of dissatisfaction and discontent. Abruptly he spurred the gelding ahead, to splash across the ford.

He let the mount have its head as they neared the Diamond, finally swinging into

the yard and dismounting near the back porch.

He found Eve in the living room, sitting at the huge carved desk that had once been her father's. She was wearing levis and a woolen shirt open at the neck. Her shining black hair, falling in gentle waves, accented the deep blue of her eyes as she looked toward him across the room. She smiled, rising, then stopped. A small frown appeared on her face as she studied her foreman's expression.

SEEING her, something of his impatience left him. As always when in her presence, her beauty struck him afresh. This was the girl he had loved for too many years. Yet, conscious of his own position, he spoke abruptly, disregarding the look of bewilderment on her face.

"What are you waiting for, girl?" he demanded. "Do you expect everyone to stand still year in and year out while you make up your mind? Marry him, I say! Marry him and get the thing over with!"

For a long moment Eve Hammond stood still. She smiled then and came toward him, reaching up to finger the rough sheepskin of his coat.

"Marry him, Jim? Marry your best friend? I never expected to hear such words from you."

Her deliberate coyness touched off rage in Jim. There was a deeper strain of cruelty in this girl than he had reckoned possible. She knew what the months of waiting and indecision were doing to him, yet she taunted, played deliberately upon the knowledge of his love for her. At this moment Jim Sheridan could cheerfully have killed Eve Hammond. Then realizing with surprise that he was capable of such hatred, he was shocked.

Abruptly he reached for her, crushing her body to his with savage force. His lips on hers made a cruel joining, bruising, demanding without thought or care.

But as suddenly he realized that her arms had tightened about his neck. There was a swiftly rising passion alive in the lips beneath his own. She moaned at his kiss.

Jim Sheridan broke it off, letting her go as he stepped quickly back. She swayed, touching a chair, clutching it for support. She stared at him with wide, shocked eyes.

"Jim—"

"Which is it, Eve? Do you still want Dane?"

She blinked, shaking her head as though to clear her mind. Her eyes left him, traveling across the room.

"Jim please— You shouldn't have—" She broke off, then added in a lower tone, "Does the decision have to be now?"

"Now!"

But even in his anger Jim Sheridan saw that the girl had regained her self-control, her poise. She looked at him obliquely.

"What will you do, Jim? You won't leave if I marry Dane, will you?"

There should have been more anger in Jim now. He was surprised that he felt only a sudden dull fatigue.

Eve's look changed again to one of quick apprehension.

"Jim! You won't—you can't leave!" She took a short step forward. "You know Dane, you know how he is. You're the only one who can run the Diamond. Why —why, if Dad were here he wouldn't let you leave! You can't! Say you won't leave! Please, Jim!"

It would be like Eve, such a request. A spoiled little girl who thought she should own all she could see. He shook his head, turning slowly toward the door.

"Jim! Jim, please!"

He turned again at the door. "You'd better marry him, Eve. And for his sake as well as your own, you'd better do it soon!"

As he spoke the rapid beat of hoofs swept into the yard outside.

"Sheridan! Jim Sheridan!"

"Easy there, boy!" That was Ozzie's cautioning voice as Jim moved out to the porch, Ozzie speaking to the rider who was struggling to hold his rearing mount—Kit Benson, a young puncher who rode for Henry Taylor's Rocking Chair spread.

He had drawn back too harshly against the bit when entering the yard and it took

Ozzie and another hand, Slim Neal, a minute to quiet the horse. But young Benson's excitement came from something far greater than a recalcitrant mount.

AS OZZIE held the horse's head, Kit shouted at Jim on the porch.

"They shot the Old Man, Mr. Sheridan! Shot Henry Taylor plumb center! Bishop and Jeffers done it, Mike says! Mr. Taylor was out riding the south range near the brakes and must of come on 'em while they was combing out that herd folks say they run down from Government Meadow the other day!"

"Is Taylor dead?" demanded the Diamond foreman.

"Not yet, but you better get going if you want a piece of them hombres' hides! Mike Durand's ready to take the boys out soon's you get there!"

"You sure it was Bishop and Jeffers?"

"Mike says so!" the young waddy declared importantly. "Says he's going to burn Bishop out, then head up-canyon for the bench and Jeffers's place!"

Jim glanced at Ozzie Gilman, but the little tophand only shook his head. Sheridan knew only too well what the consequences of such a shooting as this might mean. If Mike Durand went off half-cocked, Bishop and Jeffers could take to the hills. Likely there was no proof of who had shot Taylor. Jeffers and Bishop might be innocent. And the two of them, with all the men they could muster, could wage an unremitting range war that could prove more disastrous, take greater toll in lives and destruction than any war the valley had ever seen. Sheridan's own father and mother had died in just such a war south of the Cimarron.

Yet at this moment at least, Jim Sheridan had no choice. He glanced again at Ozzie, saw Slim Neal's eager expression, and the same on the faces of several other hands who had heard what had happened, and were running across the yard.

"All right, boys," he said. "Let's ride!"

As Jim Sheridan swung down before the ranch house at the Rocking Chair he saw that things were bad. The mood of the men gathered here, and the resentful and accusing stare of Mike Durand, would not easily be turned aside. He knew that Durand had never lost any love for either the Diamond or himself. Mike had repeatedly urged Sheridan and McCulley and Alberson to join him in running Bishop and Jeffers out of the country, whether they had proof of their rustling or not.

Now, as Sheridan's boot touched earth, Durand pushed through the ring of his men, stopping a yard from the Diamond foreman. There was cold determination in the man, and a force of will that Jim knew had long been bottled up by Henry Taylor's aversion to violence.

Durand said, "If he dies, Sheridan, I'm putting the blame where it belongs, understand?"

The man's hatred was so plain that Sheridan knew that both his own men and the Rocking Chair riders were aware of the tension between them. This was not good in a valley where the stock of several ranches shared the benefits of a general range.

It was not the first time Jim had considered this, just as for the past year or two he had realized the growing surliness of Mike Durand. In the face of the increasing rustling in the Smoke River Basin, Jim had gone out of his way to maintain harmony between the Diamond and the Rocking Chair. With suspicion and distrust already alive, presaging an ominous future, he knew that the two largest ranches could not allow petty differences to cloud the issue. Yet Durand's manner had steadily grown more distant and a breach between the crews of the two spreads had become obvious.

There was Anne, of course. But that was a situation over which Jim Sheridan had no control. He had been friendly, but he had never encouraged Anne when he had seen that certain light in her eyes. Mike Durand's jealousy, Jim could understand. But in this moment it seemed as though there were something more, something which Jim could not fathom that was goading Durand toward a deliberate break with the Diamond.

WHAT was eating at the foreman of the Rocking Chair? Ambition? As Jim met the man's angry glance he tried to fathom what was behind the stare. And it came to him abruptly that if Henry Taylor died this man undoubtedly would have full control of the Rocking Chair. And when Dane and Eve Hammond married and if he, Jim Sheridan, should leave, the Diamond would be at the man's mercy.

But this was a picture that Jim Sheridan rejected, as he many times had rejected, had postponed indefinitely, the time when he would ride out of the valley in final farewell. Even the mere thought put anger in him now, but he immediately controlled it. He nodded at Durand and walked past him toward the porch. But Durand's voice followed, in it tones of threat.

"I'm taking the boys out this time, Sheridan, whether you side us or not. As soon as McCulley comes we ride!"

McCulley. Something else Sheridan had noticed. Durand and Tom McCulley seemed to be having more and more in common while Frank Alberson, McCulley's partner, was inclined to be on the cautious side. Jim wondered suddenly if it was Durand's intention to drive a wedge between the two partners, splitting the Circle M asunder.

CHAPTER IV

New Boss of the Range

EVEN more quickly than the thought of treachery came, Jim Sheridan discarded his suspicion. Good Lord! Was he getting worse than the rest? Suspicion, lack of faith, distrust. He felt impatient with himself. But his dissatisfaction immediately dropped away when he walked into the ranch house living room.

Portly, balding Doc Jamieson was just entering through a bedroom door beyond. He pulled the door to, and stood there a moment, thoughtfully tugging at his square-cut beard. He looked squarely at Jim Sheridan finally, and shook his head.

Jim knew the verdict then. Henry Taylor was dead. From this minute on, he knew that the die was cast. He thought fleetingly of Lou Bishop and Dirk Jeffers, of Durand's position now, and of Tom McCulley's eagerness for the gun. There also was Dane Carter, and Ozzie Gilman's suspicions of his former friend.

But finally, blotting out all other thoughts, came a sudden deep sorrow that touched him more intimately than he had thought possible.

The owner of the Rocking Chair was dead. Through the more than ten years he had known the old Southerner, Henry Taylor had been his friend. He had lived more in the past than in the present, of course, but had brought only the finer aspects of that past to bear in his relations with his neighbors and friends.

There was sorrow in the Diamond foreman, but more—a premonition that this death would be but the first of many soon to come. The doctor went out the front door, but Jim Sheridan was still standing in the center of the living room floor when Anne Taylor opened the bedroom door.

He was not prepared for the look on Anne's face as she moved toward him across the room. Her father had died only minutes before. Yet she was smiling!

There were unshed tears in her eyes, but surrounding her was a soft aura of happiness, of fulfillment, he could not understand.

"He was glad to go, Jim," she murmured.

He shook his head. "I'm more sorry than you know."

"He was old," she said easily. "The present meant little to him. And the manner of his going—" She stumbled on this, but shook her head, went on firmly. "He said that didn't matter, that the manner of death means little. He said he hoped it would not cause bloodshed here in the valley, because of the way it happened."

Tall and slender, she moved gracefully away to stand near a curtained window at one side of the room. Chin up, she spoke softly, though she did not look at Jim Sheridan again.

"He could not stand friction, discontent, hatred, unhappiness—any of those things. I don't think I ever told you, Jim, but I had five brothers—once. Five boys. Five young men. Five sons of my father. And they were all lost in the war!"

She hesitated, but did not turn. Jim felt an aching surge of sympathy for her, sensing that she was talking against the time when pain eventually was sure to come.

"The War," she said. "He never thought it was worth it—the fighting, the cause, any part of it. Really, he died then, I guess. My father died with his sons. They were his pride, his life! You should have seen them, Jim! Lined up shoulder to shoulder, so tall they—" She stopped herself, perhaps realizing she was speaking too rapidly. "That's why Father spoke to you and the others the way he did the other night. He couldn't take part in a war against anyone. He used to tell me when I was a little girl—" She choked, and there was the threat of tears in her eyes. This was dangerous ground, these memories. "He used to tell me, 'Be kind, Anne. Maybe if we will all be kind this won't happen again.' "

SHE had gone too far. Sheridan read that in the wild look she gave him. The full realization of her father's death, of her own irrevocable loss, was striking home in Anne.

Then in a quick run she flung herself across the room. He caught her in his arms and held her as grief took charge. It came in deep, rending sounds that wrenched her body.

For a long time they stood that way, until finally her sobbing ceased. She looked up at him with tear-washed eyes.

"I'm glad you're here, Jim," she whispered. "So glad you're here!"

He kissed her then, gently, as though reassuring a stricken child. Her lips were tender and warm, salty with her tears. Abruptly he realized the nature of the love this girl felt for him. There was no thought of self in Anne. None of Eve's grasping, possessive passion. He felt humble, wondering at the gentle warmth that came to him with her kiss.

The screen door behind him banged then and the heavy tread of footsteps shook the room. Jim turned, holding the girl with one arm. He had only a fleeting glimpse of Mike Durand's angry face before the man's grip swung him about and a raised fist drove into his mouth, slamming him back, fighting for balance.

"Mike!" Anne cried. "Mike Durand! Have you gone crazy?"

She planted herself before her foreman, eyes blazing in fury as he stared past her at Jim. Sheridan wiped a hand across his mouth, seeing blood.

"All right, Sheridan!" Durand's voice was harsh with threat. "You've had your day! You've set foot on Rocking Chair grass for the last time, understand? When McCulley and I have taken care of Bishop there'll be an accounting between us and you. Now ride! Get out! And warn your men to stay clear of the Rocking Chair!"

"Mike Durand!" There was disbelief in Anne Taylor's voice. Anger flamed in her face and she stepped forward, swinging her hand quickly upward in a blow that struck the big foreman squarely across the face. Durand's expression did not change, though he glanced at her briefly.

"Go to your room, girl. This is no affair of yours." His eyes swung back to Jim. "All right, Sheridan! Ride!"

There was shock in Anne's face as Sheridan moved toward the door. Sheridan knew that to push Durand now would be to invite gun play, in spite of Anne's presence. He had underestimated the completeness of Durand's ambitions, though not the man's strength. The foreman of the Rocking Chair had waited only for word of Henry Taylor's death and had taken over. And, for the moment at least, there was little that Sheridan could do.

He said, "It will be all right, Anne. You need a rest. Things will work out."

He went through the door then, not waiting for her to answer him. Moving down from the porch, he saw that Tom McCulley had arrived with half a dozen men. The fact that these Circle M riders mingled with Rocking Chair men, while Ozzie Gilman and the four Diamond hands stood apart by the corral, suddenly became pregnant with meaning. McCulley was mounted and Sheridan saw the grinning look of contempt on the man's round face.

"I figured you'd pussyfoot around long enough and get caught out on a limb one of these days, Sheridan," he drawled.

Jim stopped, squinting up against the harsh glare of the noonday sun.

"I see Frank's not along, McCulley. You ramrodding the Circle M these days?"

Jim remembered then that when he and Ozzie had left Alberson in the foothills above Carter's Pothook Ranch that morning, the man had mentioned something about "nosing around a while up this way." It was unlikely that Alberson had returned to the Circle M before McCulley had ridden out. This meant that Tom McCulley was siding Durand strictly on his own. Sheridan frowned, sensing the development of a pattern he had suspected before.

McCULLEY grinned again. "Wouldn't worry none about the Circle M if I was you. Mike and me's big enough to handle this little chore you been holding back on lately. And another thing." His gaze narrowed as he looked down. "If I was you I wouldn't be too surprised if this little deal turned up more cards than Bishop's and Jeffers's. Another gent's been sitting in on a lot of games lately. And I wouldn't be a mite surprised to find he's drawn to his last hand!"

"McCulley!" Durand's voice broke sharply from the porch.

The man was standing spraddle-legged at the top of the steps. Meeting the hatred and the open defiance of this foreman's gaze, Sheridan realized once more the dire consequences that might follow Henry Taylor's death. A man had died, and the balance of power was shifting in Smoke River Basin. Mike Durand had taken over the Rocking Chair. That this lank, forceful and ambitious man exerted more than a little control over McCulley was obvious. If these two could wipe out Bishop's Bar B spread, Mike Durand would be the big man in the basin.

Jim Sheridan wanted to wash his hands of the whole affair. The Diamond was strong enough to guard her own. But a second's fleeting insight into the future gave him pause. *Was* the Diamond, or any other ranch strong enough to stand alone against hostile neighbors, against suspicion and distrust that at this moment was threatening to break into open warfare in spite of the lack of proof of any man's guilt?

Jim remembered Texas and the range war that had cost the lives of his parents so long before. He held himself against his inclination to turn his back on the Rocking Chair.

Meeting Durand's gaze across the yard, he said grimly, "You've got no proof, Durand. It's no simple thing, taking the law into your hands. Anyone could have killed Henry. If you ride against Bishop, without proof, you may regret it."

McCulley laughed jeeringly. "You can stand still while your cattle's rustled and your punchers take bushwhack bullets in the back, Sheridan. The rest of us ain't as weak-kneed and spindly around the shanks!"

"Shut up, McCulley!" Durand's tone snapped like a whip. Staring at Sheridan, he said, "You cut your pie a long while back. Henry Taylor paid with his life for his piece of that pie! Now I'm giving orders, understand? Your day is gone, Sheridan. And don't worry about me having regrets. Now, ride! Get off the Rocking Chair! And keep your men clear, or they'll get the same treatment we're giving every long-rope ranny we find!"

Jim Sheridan nodded at Ozzie as he strode to his mount. The Diamond crew got into saddle and rode out. Their dust lifted and settled slowly to earth like a final curtain behind them. . . .

It was mid-afternoon when Sheridan and the two Diamond hands reached the crest of hills that gave way to the higher benchlands and the mountains beyond. Swinging south along this ridge he led the way along a route paralleling the march of the high, craggy peaks on his right and the spreading, immense sprawl of the flat basin floor far down to his left. On one hand timber and gaunt granite ridges climbed toward the rearing summits. On the other, serried, grass-brown hills dropped off to the haze-shrouded Smoke River Valley floor.

Rounding the head of a small ravine, Jim climbed the final shoulder of a long, lateral ridge that dropped off into the maze of eroded foothills below. Below this ridge, a ravine fell quickly away, widening and deepening into a sand-floored canyon that twisted out of sight a hundred yards or more to the east. The sandy floor of the canyon, as well as the more steeply sloping head of the ravine where it rose up into the first growth of timber, showed the clear imprints of a well-traveled trail. Sheridan drew up here, nodding to the Diamond men. They rested their mounts on the slope.

This was Lou Bishop's back door. Through this canyon, narrow and steep as it was here at the head, Bishop yearly moved much of his stock, pushing it up onto the higher benchlands and mountain meadows for the lush summer graze. It was through this canyon too that the Smoke Valley ranchers had long suspected that Dirk Jeffers had sallied down upon the basin herds, driving stolen cattle upward and on across the high pass to the west.

SUCH activities, of course, could have been carried on only with Bishop's knowledge and consent. Lou Bishop's Bar B headquarters were in the cove at the mouth of this canyon, watered by the spring that bubbled forth half-way down the canyon's descent.

[*Turn page*]

Round-Up Pete Says

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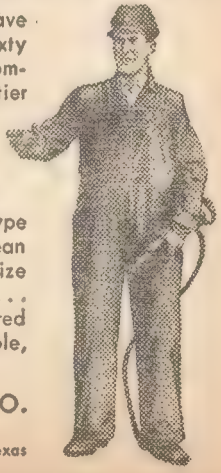

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Going over it all in his mind once more, Jim Sheridan found himself mulling over the problem he had never been able to solve. Lou Bishop. Dirk Jeffers. What was the tieup between these two men? Most of those in the valley believed that Bishop and Jeffers were partners, outright rustlers, operating behind the front of Bishop's Bar B.

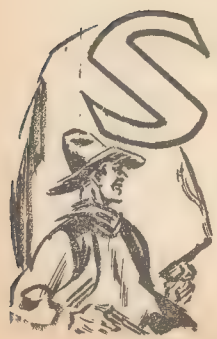
Sheridan shook his head. Of this he had never been too sure. Jeffers, yes. There was no doubt in Jim's mind but that Dirk Jeffers and his ever changing group of cronies were directly responsible for most of the rustling this past year. The very fact that Jeffers had steered clear of Basin City for well over six months, clinging to the hills and avoiding all personal contact with the ranchers of the valley, only pointed up suspicion against him.

Bishop, however, was no fly-by-night. Lou Bishop had been in the basin for over five years. Remembering the actual hatred he had felt for the man when he had last faced him in the Longhorn Saloon, Sheridan wondered how much of this had been born of reason, and how much engendered by the feeling that had arisen when he had found Johnny Watkins dead.

Even now, though, he knew he had been right in avoiding gun play with only suspicion as the spur.

CHAPTER V

Opening Guns



SUSPICION and distrust. These, Jim Sheridan knew, were deadly enemies of man. In this past year alone he had watched these feelings grow in the hearts of men, had felt them within his own breast, until now here he was, waiting for the distant rattle of guns that would signal the opening of a range war that inevitably would bring ruin.

He stirred in his saddle, studying the high-piled, creamy clouds above the basin's far rim. Rolling a smoke, he tried to pierce the summery haze that covered the valley floor. Far to the east and the north lay the Diamond; south and east, the Rocking Chair. The Circle M, crouched close to the near hills, as did Bishop's Bar B, and almost directly north, Dane Carter's Pothook was sandwiched between the last two.

Thought of Dane sent the broken match snapping off into the grass from Jim's hand. He felt actual relief when the young puncher beside him spoke.

"Be all the same with me," he said, "if Ozzie and Slim was to shake a leg, rounding up the rest of the boys." The name of the cowboy who spoke was Denver and he wore a frown of concentrated worry as he stared down-canyon toward Bishop's Bar B. He was a red-faced, freckled youngster of nineteen and had been with the Diamond less than a year. "We'd make a pretty target, sitting here like chickadees, was Bishop to come up from below and Jeffers hit us from the bench."

The foreman gave him the edge of his grin.

"Ozzie and Slim will be along," he said. "And anyway we're not gunning for anyone yet." Even as he spoke Jim realized that if Durand did attack the Bar B he would have to tell these men exactly how things stood. Though Sheridan was not backing the Rocking Chair in such a move, the Diamond would have need for the guns of her men as well as their ropes. It was not every puncher who would stay on in the face of what might be building up. Thirty and found might buy a man's sweat, but it was damn poor pay for taking a chance on lead in the back.

The other rider, Hank Olsen, a leather-faced waddy who had been with the Diamond for five years, slapped the withers of his mount and said,

"Ain't no difference to me, Jim, but I been wondering if maybe we ain't been off on a wrong track all along. Seems to me

Durand's playing it pretty high and mighty these days." He squinted at Jim, lifting one brow as he spat. "If it was Bishop who gunned down old man Taylor, I'd say he was going out of his way to do Mike Durand a favor, wouldn't you?"

Sheridan considered this, as he had earlier.

"But you don't think Bishop would pull a thing like that, eh, Hank?"

"Well—" Olsen massaged his jaw in thought—"it don't hardly make sense, does it? If I was Lou Bishop I sure wouldn't do nothing like killing old man Taylor. If Lou's been using the long rope like we figure, he'd know a thing like that would sour the deal quicker'n anything he could do."

"Would you say Mike Durand gunned down his own boss?"

"Well, now"—Olsen's features struggled with this contemplation—"I didn't exactly say that. But—"

"How about Johnny Watkins? Would you say Durand and his boys killed Watkins, throwing the blame off on Jeffers and Lou?"

But Hank Olsen had obviously not thought his own suspicions through. He shook his head, with nothing to say to this. Sheridan searched the dropping run of the canyon below, listening carefully for any sound of gunfire that would surely carry up from the Bar B if Durand attacked.

Olsen's words, however, had started his mind once more upon the same track. This question had immediatey occurred to Jim when he had first heard of Henry Taylor's bushwhacking. Why would either Jeffers or Bishop do such a thing? It did not make sense. And the more he pondered upon it the less sense it made. Among other reasons, it was to discover the answer to this question that had made him decide to ride up here to the head of the canyon. It was a slim chance, but his only one, of talking to Lou Bishop before the wholesale blast of flaming guns shattered forever the peace of the entire Smoke River Basin.

IF BISHOP were warned by anyone of Durand's impending raid, Sheridan had figured the man might withdraw to the benchlands, perhaps enlisting Jeffers's aid. If he did, Jim wanted at least to hear the owner of the Bar B affirm or deny the shooting of which he stood accused.

Still there was no sound from below, neither of hoofbeat nor gunfire. Jim frowned over the delay, thinking how Tom McCulley had said, just before he, Jim, had ridden out of the Rocking Chair yard, "There's another gent who's been sitting in on a lot of games lately." And McCulley also had said, "I wouldn't be surprised to find he's drawn to his last hand!"

Dane Carter. Suspicion of Dane cut like a knife. Memory of their long years of friendship only increased the torture that clawed more deeply into Sheridan's mind as each day passed. Jim wondered if he had refused a final showdown with Bishop and Jeffers only because he was afraid of what he might find out about Dane.

Without it quite being said in words, he knew what Ozzie thought about Dane. Ozzie believed that Dane Carter was working with Bishop and Jeffers—or at least Jeffers—on the sly. It was in Ozzie's mind that Dane took money in exchange for information, that he spotted the likely herds and kept Jeffers informed of the movements and intentions of the different ranchers and their crews.

But all the hints Ozzie had let drop, as well as the insinuations of some of the other men, Jim Sheridan had pretended to ignore. Dane Carter was his friend, as Ozzie Gilman was his friend. And he had hoped, no matter what his own desires, that Eve and Dane would marry and get the annoying delay over with.

The sudden sound of hoofbeats coming down from the timber above brought Sheridan up sharply. He nodded at the men beside him and they all rode quickly across the slope to a shielding growth of seedling pines.

Dirk Jeffers was the first to appear. He came on in the lead, dropping down

through the covering screen of jackpine and fir toward the narrowing approach to the canyon. He was animal-lean, riding slack in the saddle, his swarthy face bearded, his shabby clothes showing the effects of continual wear by a man who lived much on the trail. Dirk Jeffers, jackal of the benchlands above the Smoke, a man who survived by his skill at rustling and whose cleverness had defied detection during the year he had operated here.

He rode on downward, followed by four mangy and trail-hardened rannihans who filed singly from the timber into the head of the deep ravine.

Sheridan glanced quickly at the face of the young cowboy on his right. Denver's eyes were wide, watching the outlaws passing. Though Sheridan would have given much to have had Ozzie and a few more Diamond hands along now, he grunted at the pair with him and moved out of cover. All three had their weapons in hand when they came to a stand on the slope directly above Jeffers and his men.

"All right, Dirk!" At the sound of Jim's commanding voice the outlaws drew their mounts to an instant stop. Five pairs of eyes jerked upward in concerted surprise.

"No gun play!" Sheridan barked. "You boys are covered!" In this crucial moment that would decide between immediate violent action and armed truce, Sheridan saw the red-eyed, sullen looks of men who were beat for sleep, who had likely been long on the trail and whose reflexes were dulled with fatigue.

He said, "That's it, boys. Easy does it. You may not know it, Jeffers, but you're riding head-on into a war down below—one you may not be able to handle."

Surprise had faded instantly from Jeffers's hawklike face. His eyes darted nervously along the line of his men, went upward narrowly, squinting with suspicion and scorn.

"Well, now, he said raspingly. "And I reckon the foreman of the Diamond rode all the way up from the Smoke just to break this news nice and peaceable like to his old friend Jeffers just for old time's sake, eh?" He chuckled. "What do you take me for, Sheridan? Some runny-nosed button?"

"I'm telling you you're through, Dirk. Killing one of my riders was bad enough, but this last little affair capped it for good where you're concerned. Easy, gents!"

SHERIDAN'S gun barrel jerked back to cover one of the riders who stirred. He was instantly still.

The foreman said, "I'm pulling you out, Jeffers. If you come along you might even get a trial. If the rest of you boys are as smart as I think you are, you'll ride. Durand and McCulley are hitting the Bar B with twenty men down below. The trail through Bear Pass is clear, so you can take it. You won't get this chance again!"

Abruptly Jeffers broke into profanity, harsh, foul language that brought blood to his face and a foaming fleck of spittle to his bearded lips. Yet he did not move either hand from the horn of his saddle.

"Damn you for a mangey sidewinder, Sheridan! You've got no right to pull down on a man this way! I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Me and the boys been outside. We came through Bear Pass last night and I can prove it. If one of your boys got bushwhacked you'd better look a little closer to home. Me, I ain't claiming to be no lily-of-the-valley, but I'm damned if I stand still and be accused of some other owlhoot's work!"

"You'll stand still, or you'll lie still, Dirk!" Sheridan eared back the hammer of his gun. "The stove in your shanty was still warm at dawn. And I don't see any wings on that cayuse of yours." To Jeffers's men he said, "What about it, boys? You playing this one smart for a change?"

Sheridan watched them exchange sidelong glances. Yet there was sudden question, a doubt and hesitancy he had not expected in his own mind. Jeffers's surprise at being accused of Watkins's murder seemed to be sincere. During the few times he had come in contact with the man, Sheridan had noticed that impassivity was not one of Jeffers's long suits.

The man's indignation certainly was genuine. And the fact that he had completely missed Sheridan's reference to "this last affair" seemed to indicate that he either knew nothing of Henry Taylor's death, or that Jim's own judgment of the outlaw was sadly at fault.

The rider immediately behind Jeffers shifted slowly about in his saddle. He glanced back at his partners, shrugging lightly, yet carefully not moving his hands.

"Well, boys, looks to me like now's as good a time as any to move along. Like Dirk says, I can't see letting myself in for something somebody else likely done. 'Course, it's too bad Dirk ain't got the choice we have. But under the gun like this, I'd say let's ride."

The small, dark-haired rider who spoke avoided Jeffers's eyes. Dirk cursed again, though his shoulders slumped, as though an overwhelming fatigue dragged him down. He looked up at Sheridan with red-rimmed, sullen eyes from which all scorn had fled.

"I never figured you for one who'd kick a man when he was down, Sheridan. Durand, sure, any time he'd get the chance. But I always figured you'd hand it out straight. Me, I've pulled a few long-rope plays in my time. But I ain't admitting nothing and you can't expect me to. But I'm telling you and I'm telling you straight, Sheridan, that neither me nor any of these boys here gunned down any hand of yours. We never had to. I play it smarter than that."

He shrugged and his eyes faltered and went away. When no one spoke he sighed,

"I reckon if you're set on stringing me up I'll just have to figure I'm payin' for things I done all right. But they ain't the things you'll be hanging me for, and that's the God's truth!"

In the moment's silence that came, Sheridan pondered. He was about to speak when the distant rattle of gunfire carried up from below. One, two, three single shots, then a flurry of firing that sounded like a schoolboy rattling a slat along some neighbor's picket fence.

Jim said, "Steady, gents! Don't let a little thing like this spook you out of this world!"

But even as he spoke, Jim Sheridan felt sick in the pit of his stomach, knowing that now there would be no turning back. The seeds of violence and hatreds were being sown below, and the harvest would be bitter fruit. Durand and McCulley had taken it upon themselves to eliminate a neighbor rancher by force, a rancher against whom they had no proof of wrong-doing, but only their own suspicions, abetted by a greed and ambition of which Jim Sheridan was now fully aware.

He said, "Henry Taylor is dead, Dirk. Durand is running the Rocking Chair. He's after your hide. Yours and Lou Bishop's. This time you boys went a little too far."

DIRK JEFFERS stared blindly down-canyon, as though he might pierce the twisting wall of earth and stone that blocked his view of what was taking place below. His head turned slowly and he stared uncomprehendingly up the slight slope at Jim. Sheridan would have sworn to any man that this was the first the outlaw had heard of Henry Taylor's death. He became certain that though Dirk Jeffers was a rustler, possibly deserving the rope, that he'd had no hand in either killing.

The significance of this fact struck him fully then. If Jeffers was innocent, the odds were long that Lou Bishop was equally innocent. Who, then, was the guilty man?

The muffled beat of hoofs drummed up from the sandy floor of the canyon. Each man on the slope and in the narrow defile of the ravine stiffened as a single rider pounded around the near bend. Jim Sheridan froze as recognition drove home.

Low in the saddle and ramming his heels into the animal's flanks at each stride, Dane Carter spurred up the slope. Dane Carter, flushed with exertion, batting his hat against his mount's rump, shouting, obviously not seeing the three Diamond men above.

"Light out, Jeffers! Hell's busted loose! Durand's throwing thirty men against the Bar B! Damn it, man, make for the pass!"

Jim Sheridan's heart sank. This was it, then. What Ozzie had said all along. Dane had thrown in with Bishop and Jeffers. Dane Carter, calling out to an owlhoot rustler as to a partner and friend!

CHAPTER VI

The Innocent Rustlers

AS DANE CARTER reined forward on the slope beneath, Jim Sheridan's gun, the foreman felt a familiar stab of futility. The years of comradeship between himself, Ozzie and Dane flickered jeeringly upon the curtain of his mind. Why? Why had Dane done this? The question twisted in his mind with a physical pain. Why would a man like Dane, with everything to gain through his impending marriage to Eve, chance it all for the few measly dollars he could pick up by throwing in with an outlaw like Jeffers?

Sheridan did not expect an answer, even from the innermost recesses of his own thoughts. This was something he had been refusing to face all along, but he should have. He knew Dane was drinking more and more all the time, knew of his heavy losses at cards, and in the past two years the big, laughing man's irresponsibility had seemed to increase rather than diminish. It was as though Dane, released from the minor discipline he'd known in his job with Diamond by the windfall that had allowed him to strike out on his own, had neither the sense of direction nor the ambition to establish himself. And now he had come to this!

While all eyes were on the approaching Carter, Dirk Jeffers twisted in the saddle, yelling to his men. His gun came up and out in the same instant, blasting a shot up the slope at the Diamond riders.

"Gun 'em down, you damned fools! There's only three of them up there!" he whooped, firing again as Sheridan's mount reared on the sloping ridge.

Jim snapped off a shot, fighting the frightened gelding beneath him. The animal had taken a bullet, was rearing high and pawing at the sky with its forelegs. Olsen and Denver fired into the ravine from either side of him as a fusillade of shots beat up the slope, then Jeffers and his crew were spurring headlong for the timber.

Sheridan caught a fleeting glimpse of Dane's upturned face. The laughing, devil-may-care expression was wiped off it now, the heavy, handsome features pale with anxiety and fear. Suddenly Dane Carter bent his head, stretching himself low in the saddle, and also spurred madly toward the head of the ravine and the safety of the timber.

One man of Jeffers's crew screamed abruptly, coming erect in the saddle and clawing air, then falling heavily to earth. The others swept past him, gaining the first edge of jackpine at the head of the rise. Olsen, behind Jim, cursed as he felt the impact of a bullet in his flesh. Sheridan's horse screamed as it reared once more in agony and crashed to the ground. Twisting free, Jim threw himself down and across the slope, scrambling away from the animal's flailing hoofs. A final round of shots went wide as Jeffers and his men disappeared through the dense timber.

Sheridan got to his feet, staring after the fleeing crew, then quickly turned to put a mercy bullet through the head of his fallen mount.

He was climbing back toward the crest of the ridge when the sound of running hoofs beat up once more from the canyon. Olsen and Denver were still in the saddle, the older man clutching his wounded shoulder as he stared toward the canyon floor. Sheridan saw the look of apprehension on Denver's smooth young face.

"Gee, Boss, we ain't going to try to stop Lou Bishop's crew, are we?" Denver stared. "Not without Ozzie and the rest of the boys?"

Jim smiled as he shook his head.

"Not even with Ozzie, boy," he said. He glanced at Hank Olsen, nodding toward the cover of second-growth pine further along the ridge. As they moved out of sight of the approaching riders he said:

"I've got an idea we won't find the hombres we want in Bishop's crew. And it might take some doing to flush them out wherever they are."

THEY had hardly gained the screen of trees before Lou Bishop's men rounded the bend below. There were nine in all, coming on fast, with Bishop himself near the tail end of the line. The men hardly glanced up as they spurred upgrade, mounting rapidly at the head of the canyon and disappearing into the timber toward the higher benchlands and the mountains.

"Y'know, Jim," Olsen said, "I got a feeling that that coyote, Jeffers, was telling the truth. Ain't no doubt he's trailed many a head of our stock, and Bishop likewise, but I'm dogged if I don't think it was some other hombre gunned down Johnny and old man Taylor."

Hank Olsen had folded his kerchief and was pressing it against his wound beneath his shirt. He was a grizzled, stocky man, no longer young, but far from past his prime.

Sheridan nodded. He said, "Better get down and take it easy, Hank. Ozzie and the boys will be along any time and we'll get you in to the doc."

When the man had dismounted, Jim stepped into saddle, glancing down into the canyon and listening intently for sounds of pursuit of Bishop. It came almost immediately and he glanced at Denver, saying, "Stick here, feller, with Hank. I've got another little chore I can handle as well alone."

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . ."

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He was waiting on the slope when Durand and McCulley hove into sight at the head of their men.

A single shot brought the men up short. Even at this distance Sheridan did not miss the quick look of wariness in Mike Durand's face, nor the instant blanching of fear in McCulley's. It took them a second to locate him on the canyon slope. When they had he spoke quickly, directly to the foreman of the Rocking Chair, and mincing no words.

"You're on the wrong track, Durand! You won't find the killers you want in Bishop's or Jeffers's crews!"

For a moment no man in the canyon stirred. Durand, well in the lead, searched the edges of timber above, his gaze coming narrowly back to the lone rider who faced him. There was contempt and harsh amusement in his tone when he spoke.

"You aiming to hold us up all by your lonesome, ranny?"

"I'm telling you you've called the wrong play! If you're after the man who gunned down Henry Taylor you won't find him with Bishop or Jeffers! I talked to Jeffers myself! He didn't know a thing!"

"You talked to Jeffers, eh?" Durand laughed, a harsh, unpleasant sound. His glance slid around to McCulley and the grouping of men at his back.

"You hear that, McCulley? Our friend Sheridan's been holding a nice, friendly confab with these long-rope gents while we been trying to teach them the wrong and right of things down below. I'd say that puts the Diamond in a mighty peculiar spot, wouldn't you?"

Tom McCulley wiped at his face with a colored bandanna. His heavy features were red from exertion, though his confidence had returned now that he was sure they were faced by only a single man. He, too, laughed.

"I'd say it looked sort of like our friend Sheridan's thrown in on the wrong side of the fence, myself. Can't say I'm much surprised, though, considering how his old pard, Carter, has been in with 'em all along!"

But Durand was not listening. He had been studying Sheridan's position upon the slope with narrowed eyes and a look of intent calculation on his face. Seeing that look, Jim Sheridan felt in danger for the first time. He realized now that he was facing a man who had pulled out all the stops to his own personal ambition, a man who had hated him for a longer time than he himself had even suspected. Here was a man who was capable of killing his own employer to further his ambitions, a man who, in raging jealousy and lust for control, would not now hesitate to obliterate any others who might oppose his will.

HE SAW the man's hand move deliberately to the butt of the weapon on his thigh.

The muffled, drumming sound of a horse's hoofs beat up from the canyon below the bend. Without taking his eyes from Durand, Sheridan caught sight of the rider, and started in surprise.

Rounding the canyon wall, Eve Hammond reined in quickly, barely avoiding overrunning the tail riders of the Rocking Chair and Circle M crews. She wore levis, and her lustrous dark hair was gathered beneath a broad-brimmed hat. Her eyes widened as she saw the men before her, with Sheridan facing them. Her face was pale, and anxiety trembled in her voice as she called to her foreman,

"Jim! Is it true, what they say about Dane? Have you seen him? Was he at Bishop's today?"

For a breath of time Jim Sheridan had no answer to give her. In those seconds he saw again the years gone by—Eve, Dane and himself. He shook his head and lied, "No, I haven't seen him, Eve. What made you think Dane would be with Lou Bishop? You should know better."

"Well, if he wasn't it was just pure luck, that's all I can say!" McCulley spat contemptuously as the girl reined forward along the line of men. "I say Carter's as guilty as the rest and he'll dance just as high when we take him!"

Anger flamed up in Sheridan at this fat-bodied coward. He wondered again about the partnership between this man

and the mild-spoken, clear-sighted Alberson, whom he had always admired.

He said, "Some day you'll say too much at the wrong time and have to stand good for it, McCulley! You might find it tough, having to stand up alone!"

Durand spoke sharply.

"I asked you a question, Sheridan! You aiming to hold us up?"

"I warned you that you're after the wrong men, Durand!" Sheridan heard the soft clop of hoofs on the ridge at his back, but went on. "I'm certain that neither Bishop nor Jeffers had anything to do with killing Watkins and Taylor! I told you at the Rocking Chair you might regret this, and I'm telling you again, for the last time. If you hang any man without absolute proof of his guilt you'll find yourself on the wrong side of the law! That may mean nothing to you now, but you might see the day when things take on a little different hue!"

Durand's voice tightened. He said, "You've put your foot in my business too many times, mister! This time—" The Rocking Chair foreman's voice stopped short as his glance lifted to the crest of the ridge above Jim.

Jim heard the scuffing of hoofs in the soft earth at his back then, and knew that Ozzie had shown up at last. He did not look around until Ozzie moved down by his side. He caught the sandy-haired little tophand's broad, solemn wink as he glanced back at his men. Ozzie had rounded up an even dozen Diamond hands, extending them in a line along the slope above the bunched crews of the Circle M and the Rocking Chair.

"All right." Sheridan spoke to Eve, nodding toward the head of the ravine. "Get up here where you belong."

The first touch of fear showed in the pale face now. She rode forward past McCulley and Durand, urging her mount upgrade. She stared mutely at the body of the member of Jeffers's crew sprawled where he had fallen, gained the head of the canyon, and circled back to come to a halt among her own men.

Sheridan said, "That's one of Jeffers's men, Durand. Dirk made a break for it and got away. I was in no position to stop Lou Bishop even if I'd had the idea, which I didn't. Don't get the notion that the Diamond is siding any rustler's crew."

"I'll make my own ideas, Sheridan!" Controlled fury showed in Durand's bony face. "I set out to do a job and I'm doing it, savvy? We're cleaning the basin of every long-rope son we find. And that means Bishop and Jeffers and anybody we find with them!" He signaled to McCulley and the men behind him. "We're coming through, mister! And don't think I won't remember that the Diamond stood back and let two rustler crews go free!"

WITH Durand scowling as he led the way up the slope to the timbered mountain country, the line of riders moved forward. Sheridan, in the van of his men, studied the sullen hostility on the face of each rider who passed below.

And in these moments the foreman of the Diamond foresaw the end of all peace in Smoke Basin. Outright range war would soon include the Diamond.

In the meantime, if he could possibly find the men who had killed old man Taylor and the Diamond waddy, then there still might be hope of averting a range war. Sending his men back to the Diamond, in charge of Ozzie, he rode on alone.

Two days later, Jim Sheridan found one of the men he sought, hoping to be put on the right track to find the killer's whereabouts. Or, more accurately, the dark-haired foreman thought, and grinned wryly to himself, the man found him.

He had spent the night near a small mountain stream above the shelving benchland plateaus. The day before he had seen the smoking ruins of Jeffers's shack on the lower bench, and although he had cut the trail of several groups of riders, and had actually caught sight of four Rocking Chair hands on a distant ridge, he had met no man in his circuitous day and a half ride to these heights.

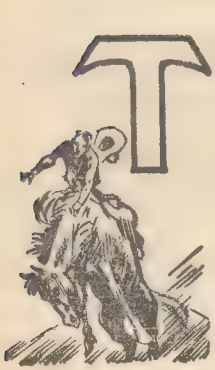
An hour past he had broken free of the last stubborn growth of timber, climbing steadily up the barren slate and granite

shoulder of the high-flung mother range. Here th ancient, raw stone held communion with the sky. Stubborn, crusty-hard patches of snow and occasional lumps of dead lichen-moss made sketchy covering upon this high outpost of earth.

Bear Pass, hardly more than a jagged depression between the saw-toothed peaks clawing skyward on either hand, lay three hundred feet above and ahead. Jim Sheridan had paused here, certain in his own mind that neither the Circle M nor the Rocking Chair had ventured this far. He was realizing both his own exposure there beneath the notch of the pass and his inability to retreat before being caught by approaching darkness when his discovery was made.

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Town



THE bullet that whipped through the high, peaked crown of Jim Sheridan's hat made a sibilant, whispering sound, like Death laughing. He grabbed at the brim, catching the hat as the slapping, flat report of the carbine spat down at him from the pass. A second bullet sledged a spray of chips from the rising stone a yard to his right. A third sighed softly, an unseen bee winging its way past his ear.

Sheridan sat motionless, holding the mount beneath him steady with the tight reassurance of thigh and leg. The thin whisper of cold breeze through the pass accented the silence.

"Sheridan!"

He did not recognize the voice of the man who called down.

"Turn tail, hombre!" Hidden in the rock-hewn V of the pass, the man shouted again, "This trail's closed! Vamoose! Pronto! And that means you!"

Squinting up against the glare of the setting sun on a broad patch of snow near the crest, Sheridan studied the raw outcropping of stone at the lip of the pass. He caught a single flicker of movement, the flash of light upon gun-barrel and the half-outline of a man's dark hat against the sky.

"I want a word with Bishop!" he yelled distinctly. "Hold your fire! I'm coming on!"

Keeping his hands carefully before him he kneed his mount upward along the faint trail. Instantly another bullet spat against stone, whining off in angry ricochet.

"I'm warning you, Sheridan! The boss ain't having no part of you and your basin pards! You boys busted things open, but we'll finish it before we're through. Turn tail, Sheridan, or I'll put the next one where it belongs!"

Sheridan reined up. It was less than a hundred yards to the pass. He said, "There must be more than one of you there. Send word down to Lou! He'll see me! I'll wait right here!"

"You damned right you will! But I ain't any too sure you'll be in any condition to talk when he gets here!"

Sheridan held his silence, knowing he could do no more. In the thin, brittle air he thought he detected the shuffling sounds of movement from the pass. Before the man called again, several minutes later, Sheridan was sure he had won.

A full hour went by then, broken only by monosyllabic warnings and dire predictions of what Lou Bishop's verdict might be by the guard above, before the sound of shod hoofs upon stone filtered down to Sheridan. Then a man stepped into the open and gestured disgustedly for the Diamond foreman to come on.

"You win the hand, mister." The heavy-set puncher glared sullenly at Sheridan as the foreman halted his mount in the pass. Jim recognized the Rocking Chair rider, a man named Barney Rade, who had been in the game with Bishop and Dane Carter the last time Sheridan had faced Lou in Basin City. Barney, a man in his forties, sported a three-days' growth

of reddish beard that did not hide a broad, ugly scar that ran from the corner of his right eye to the outer point of his jaw. As he swung into saddle, nodding briefly to a younger guard who had just dismounted, he gestured Sheridan ahead.

He repeated, "You win the hand, but the game ain't hardly started, and don't you forget it, mister. You might be the big white brother on the Smoke these days, but you'll find that more than one can deal from the bottom of the deck!"

The trail dropped off even more abruptly here on the western slope. Sheridan had not crossed this divide for several years. He recalled that the town of Bear Pass beyond, once a thriving, brawling miner's camp, had been a neglected sprawl of rotting board buildings along a steep, winding gulch the last time he had seen it. One old-timer, a shriveled, wiry and shifty-eyed man named Eggleston, had kept a store there of sorts. Three or four ancient die-hard prospectors had shuffled about the place, so that the place was not exactly a ghost town.

But even then Sheridan had known the importance of Eggleston's store to a certain breed of men. The town of Bear Pass, for which he was sure they were reading now, served as a prominent supply depot and way station for the brethren of the high trail, that unofficial but often closely knit fraternity forever beyond the law, men wanted for robbery and murder in dozens of states and hundreds of counties, who could no longer take the chance of a pretense of civilized living, or pause for long in any given place.

THE high trail had no certain geographical markings, yet its twists and turnings were well-known to men who found their only security along its hidden course. Though they may have taken separate paths along its route, coming together momentarily at its oases, such as Bear Pass, no one of the true brethren ever doubted for an instant what they would find some day at the end of the high trail. A bullet, flaming from ambush or night, the slash of a blade through a sleep-lax throat; some, in desperation, by the weapon in his own hand, but more by the jarring, spine-breaking rope of justice. All found their reward at the end of the trail. But as they traveled the high road they found momentary respite, food and drink at Ira Eggleston's store.

As Jim Sheridan sat slackly in saddle, allowing his mount to pick its way down the winding, switchback grade at the head of the ravine above Bear Pass town, he weighed his decision to seek out Lou Bishop and to find Dane Carter and urge him, or force him if necessary, to return to the Diamond. He had firmly determined to find Dane and clear him, if possible, more in spite of than because of Eve Hammond's orders and pleadings. Discovering where Bishop stood and what he planned to do now was of secondary importance.

He had been uneasy about leaving the Diamond in charge of Ozzie Gilman, in spite of the little tophand's proved ability. That Durand would not rest long on his laurels was certain. Having driven off Bishop and his Bar B outfit, he would want to expand Rocking Chair range further. Jim had stopped by the Circle M headquarters, hoping to find Alberson, a potential ally and friend of the Diamond. But there had been no sign of Frank, so Sheridan had headed immediately into the hills. A tall column of smoke he had seen from the heights above the Bar B testified to what had happened to Bishop's ranch house and other buildings.

Now, dropping into the gulch past the first ramshackle remains of the dead mining town, Sheridan came fully alert. On the south slope of the ravine a dirty quiltwork of snow remained, creeping down to the edges of dusty, windowless buildings that stared blindly upon the street. The moss-grown stumps of long-fallen trees intermingled with the younger scattering of second-growth timber on either hand above.

Near the center of town Sheridan passed a building that had been converted into a stable and which now housed the horses of the Bar B crew. A man came to the door and stood staring mutely as

the Diamond foreman and his guard passed by. Several riders sat on the porch of the next house, evidently their temporary quarters. Though hostility was plain in the faces of these men, none spoke as Sheridan reined past to draw up before Ira Eggleston's store.

This was a solid frame building of two stories. Though weathered it was in good repair. At a grunt from Barney, Sheridan swung down. He had looped his mount's reins on the rail when Lou Bishop came through the door.

"Well, well, we meet again, my friend." The man's smile was an habitual mask, as was the indirectness of his words. "Can't say I'm surprised at your paying us a visit, though. Man has to ride a long way to find a friend these days."

Two strange riders bulked in the doorway behind Lou, both wary. Men as accustomed to riding by night as by day, night riders who owed allegiance to none and who by their own acts had forever alienated themselves from the world of order and law.

Sheridan wondered if Durand had been right, after all. Perhaps Bishop actually was the outlaw Durand claimed he was. But, annoyed at himself for the thought, Sheridan realized that this could have no bearing upon his own present position or purpose.

He said, "You're right about that, Lou. A man would have to ride a long way from here to find a friend, and that's for sure. But maybe we can talk turkey without letting that bother us, eh?"

FOR a single instant Bishop's smile thinned. There was the flash of hatred in his gaze. The next moment he laughed aloud, shrugging, as he gestured toward the door.

"Words, my friend, mere words. Might as well come on in and wet your whistle. It's a long ride either way."

Inside Eggleston's store a heavy plank bar stood against one wall. Two rickety poker tables and half a dozen chairs occupied the space across from the bar. Beyond these, and ranging down the room toward the staircase at the rear, were piled stacks of varied merchandise—tinned and sacked foodstuffs, tobacco, firearms and ammunition, clothing, blankets, saddles and a hundred and one odds and ends of supplies in barrel, case and shelf. An iron cookstove and table stood against the wall beyond the bar.

Ira Eggleston, a wrinkle-faced, bald little man with iron-rimmed spectacles astride a spongy nose, stood wordlessly behind the bar.

"Ira!" Bishop smote the bar top with open palm. "Set out a bottle of your private stock and go find some business upstairs. We got a special guest in this buzzard's roost says he wants to talk turkey and I reckon we better give him the chance!"

The two strange riders had backed off across the room to slouch into chairs at one of the tables, pretending an idle interest in the cards. The little man behind the bar squinted up at both men before him as he set bottle and glasses before them.

"Seems a shame," he mumbled in a thin, cracked voice, "to waste good whiskey on a ranny that ain't going to be around long enough to enjoy it noways."

Sheridan heard one of the night riders laugh. There was an ominous note of contempt and amusement in that laugh, as there was in Lou Bishop's easy smile. For the first time Jim Sheridan seriously considered the chance that he might not leave Bear Pass alive. He reached for his glass and tilted it up, feeling the liquor's burning comfort as it slid down his throat. . . .

However, he did leave the town alive. But when, an hour later, after his long and earnest talk with Bishop, he sat his horse, he did not ride alone. Bishop was with him, as was the scar-faced Barney who had brought the foreman to the outlaw town.

When they rode out, the trail slanted steeply up the bed of the twisting ravine, and for a long time they rode in silence. Rounding a final turn, Sheridan saw a cabin ahead, perched on its shelf against

the slope beside the open mouth of an ancient, deserted mine shaft. The tumbled pile of waste rocks below the mine was overgrown, and seedling and second-growth pine had pushed up here and there. A thin, vertical column of smoke lifted from the cabin chimney.

Lou Bishop drew up beside Jim.

"There's your boy, my friend. You'll find him all shacked up as cozy as a crazy pet coon. Couldn't find a snugger roost in a hundred miles of these hills."

Sheridan frowned, studying the man's mocking smile. The scar-faced Barney drew up a few yards behind the two men.

Jim said, "How do I know he's here, Bishop? How do I know this isn't some sandy of yours you're running?"

Knowing he had no choice, nor any chance against the gun at his back and with Bishop before him, Sheridan spoke only in an attempt to pierce the smiling mask with which the man Bishop veiled all his emotions and intents. Though Jim was certain now that Bishop had had nothing to do with the killing of either Watkins or Taylor, he still put no trust in the man. Lou Bishop was the owner of the Bar B and of five thousand head of stock that grazed the Smoke River Basin, but Sheridan had always sensed in him a furtiveness he did not like.

NOW, as Jim challenged the man, he saw the red flush of resentment rise quickly in Lou Bishop's face.

"I'll tell you something you may not know, friend," Bishop said softly, but there was the sibilant edging of repressed fury in his tone. "I have never gone back on my word in this life, and I have never taken the lie off a man without killing him for it. Understand that. You and I, we made a deal. I'm holding up my end right now and as long as I'm in this country no man will hear from me that Dane Carter was ever at the Bar B or over on this side of the pass. I'm trusting you to hold up your end. I take your word, you don't have to take mine. Remember that some day when you're dealing with your friends on the Smoke."

He turned then and called out to the cabin, spurring quickly up the twisting path to the door.

Sheridan followed, hearing Barney Rade coming on at his back. From what Lou Bishop said, and from his manner, Sheridan thought he had glimpsed a heretofore undiscovered facet of the character of this man. In seconds the habitual mocking smile had been erased. There had been driving determination, frankness, honesty, and a distaste for compromise in both his words and tone.

Jim Sheridan, under the pressure of events and circumstance, had been forced to make a deal with a man for whom he had no respect. Yet, thinking it over he was beginning to wonder if he had not completely misjudged his man.

CHAPTER VIII

Indian Hellcat

DRAWING up before the cabin, Bishop called Jeffers's name in a loud voice. He had swung down when the door opened slightly and an Indian girl with long braided hair and wide, dark eyes slipped through. Sheridan judged her to be sixteen or seventeen, though the early maturity of her race was evident in the shapeliness of her body beneath the brightly colored native clothes she wore. Jim guessed her to be Blackfoot or Crow, considering the proud forehead and finely boned features of her face. In the moment that her glance met his own, he saw that she was afraid, heard fear, too, in her voice as she spoke briefly to Lou Bishop in her native tongue.

"Drunk, eh?" Bishop said, and laughed without humor, moving toward the door. "Well, what the hell can you expect of a—"

He broke off with an oath, his hand streaking for the weapon at his thigh.

Sheridan saw the swarthy, grinning features of Dirk Jeffers the instant the door was slammed back. He saw the gun in the man's hand center upon his own body as he threw himself from saddle. Jeffers's gun blasted, the bullet whining close beside Sheridan's head.

The Diamond foreman had hardly hit the ground when Bishop fired. His bullet slapped through the heavy door, inches from Jeffers's ear.

"Stow it, you slab-sided son!" Bishop fired a second time as Sheridan's own gun came out. The bullet splatted into the earth before the open door. "You've played your last hand around here, Dirk Jeffers! Drop it, or I'll kill you where you stand!"

Coming up with his weapon, Sheridan saw the slack look of surprise, then anger, come into Jeffers's face. The outlaw was drunk all right. He took a step forward, staggering, then recovering his balance as he stared from man to man.

"Played m'last hand, have I? That's what you think, bucko. It's this ring-tailed ranny here that's played his last hand! Drew down on me cold and tried t'blast me out of my saddle, that's what he did. You ain't stopping me now! Not you nor anybody, see?"

The man's gun hand had been hanging limp at his side, but as he moved Sheridan knew he would have to kill the man. It was not a chore he liked for there was nothing fair about the odds. He doubted that the man could hit him at twenty feet. Yet there was the chance.

But it was Lou Bishop who fired, surprisingly. The slamming impact of the bullet took Jeffers high in the shoulder, spinning him half around. He yelled in surprise and shock as he jarred into the cabin wall. Clamping his wounded shoulder with one hand he stared about, red-eyed, his face twisted in bewilderment and pain.

Gun in hand, Sheridan glanced across the yard at the owner of the Bar B. The man was standing, feet widespread, his chin jutting belligerently as his gaze struck across at Jim. Sheridan sensed that Lou Bishop had known that Dirk Jeffers had been but an inch from death at the hands of the Diamond foreman. Bishop had fired more to save Jeffers's life than for any other reason. Again Sheridan pondered what could be the tie between these two men, one a known rustler, the other the owner of a ranch where he was on his way to wealth.

Barney spoke at Sheridan's back.

"Don't get any ideas with that pea-shooter you're holding, mister! It wouldn't be healthy, believe me!"

As Sheridan holstered his gun he noticed the Indain girl slide around the corner of the house and silently enter the door. Her eyes touched his face in passing, showing the same fear in their black, liquid depths he had seen there before. Jeffers had slid down the wall to a sitting position upon the bare earth. His eyes focused, and there was bitterness in the glance he gave Bishop.

"Why didn't you kill me while you were at it?" he snarled. "Maybe the next time your chances won't be so good!"

HIS eyes rolled, touching Sheridan, then going back to Lou. Blood welled through the fingers of the hand that clutched his shoulder, dripping slowly upon his shirt.

"Shut up, Dirk!" Holstering his weapon, Bishop moved toward the door.

"Sure, shut up!" Jeffers spat. "I've always shut up, ain't I? I've always kept shut where you're concerned! And where's it got me? Answer me that! I'm the one has to sneak around by night, I'm the one lives like a dog while you play it high and mighty. Why should I shut up any more? Huh?"

In two quick strides Bishop was towering above the man. Bending, he slapped the outlaw's face with his open hand, then back across with his knuckles—two, three, a fourth deliberate time. Jeffers's head slammed back against the rough log wall. Blood spilled from his nose, spreading across his face beneath the swipe of the rancher's hand.

"You'll stay shut, Dirk"—Bishop's voice

was silky fine—"because I say so. Savvy?" He waited a moment, then added, "And you'll stay shut about Carter, too. In fact, I don't think you'll be going anywhere to do any talking for some little time, Dirk."

He straightened then and glanced at Sheridan. He said, "I think we'll find your boy's taken on a load of booze. If this racket didn't bring him out he must be dead to the world." He nodded and went inside.

Moving to the door, Sheridan paused before the fallen man. Venom and hatred were in the gaze with which the outlaw stabbed him.

"So you made yourself a deal, eh, mister? Right smart boy, playing both ends and the middle, too!" He coughed and wiped at the blood on his face with his sleeve. He said, "You might get Carter out of these hills, but you'll find you've paid a bigger price than you thought before you're through! What'll happen when Durand finds out you made a deal with Lou? And what about Lou? If you think he puts all his stakes on the table, you'd better start thinking again!"

Sheridan stood above the man without speaking. For an instant he caught himself actually feeling sorry for the outlaw, thinking of how Jeffers was scorned in the Smoke River country, wondering once more what was between him and Lou Bishop. But there was no sympathy in his voice when he spoke to the man.

"Jeffers, I'm putting myself to a lot of trouble to get a friend of mine out of a tight. But I'm getting him out, understand? I want to know that you do understand that clearly, because if a word is ever dropped that Dane Carter ever had anything to do with you or your kind I'll know exactly where to look for the man who dropped that word. You don't look too well, Jeffers. But you're healthy right now compared to the way you'll look when I find you that day!"

He left the outlaw then, turning inside, blinking against the sudden gloom. The cabin consisted of one large room, with the far corner partitioned off by a heavy tarp that hung down from one of the rafters. Hearing Bishop's voice, Sheridan crossed to the end of the tarp and saw the Bar B owner facing the comely Indian girl before a corner bunk. Dane Carter, his wavy blond hair tousled, was struggling to lift himself from the bunk. The Pothook owner, who might become the future owner of the Diamond as well, was mumbling inanely to himself in drunken, incoherent tones as he attempted to rise. Smiling, Bishop caught Sheridan's eye.

"Tried to sink that knife of hers into me, the little scut!" he laughed. "Me, now, I never seem to have what it takes to make a squaw stand up for me like Carter, here, does."

Sheridan saw the knife then. The girl was holding it half-upraised before her. There was a wild gleam of anger in the ebony glint of her eyes and color was high in her cheeks. Her spirit and vital, savage beauty were as striking as the realization that she was ready to fight for the man she loved.

A thought of Eve Hammond sped fleetingly across Jim's mind, and he lost all restraint, seeing Dane here in this cabin in these circumstances. He moved forward quickly, gripping the drunken man's shirt and pulling him upright on the bunk. He slapped Carter twice across the face.

LOU BISHOP yelled. Catching movement from the corner of his eye, Jim whirled. Features twisted in rage, the Indian girl was upon him before he came fully around. His arm came up as the knife slashed down, the point of the blade ripping through the heavy sheepskin coat he wore. Steel grazed his shoulder, drawing a thin ribbon of blood before he could grasp her wrist. He had her then, holding the knife-hand high as he reached out and crushed her to him. Almost instantly she relaxed. He could feel her breathing and the firm, soft pressure of her breasts against his chest.

"I warned you, friend." Bishop smiled at Jim over the girl's shoulder. "A Blackfoot ain't exactly gentle when riled, and a squaw's the worst of the lot. Reckon you ain't got what it takes to please the ladies

any more than I have. Too bad your friend Carter's got all the luck, considering your setup on the Diamond."

Sheridan frowned, knowing that the man was aware of his standing in Eve Hammond's eyes. But the next moment he started back in surprise, loosing his hold on the girl as she sunk her teeth directly into his chest. She came at him again with the knife and he cursed, stumbling against the bunk.

Laughing, Bishop grabbed her wrist from behind and twisted the weapon free. Though she spat at him in rage he secured her arms tightly behind her back. Her dark eyes glared hatred and defiance at Sheridan.

"You'd better take your boy and skedaddle, mister." Lou Bishop seemed to be enjoying the struggle, his grip tightening upon the girl's arms until she became still in his grasp. "Looks like I might have to tie this filly down to give you a chance to get away!"

"Jim. Jim, ol' boy!"

Turning, Sheridan saw dim recognition in Dane's loose, grinning face. The man was still sodden, shaking his head and running his hand tenderly along his jaw.

"Where hell you been, ol' boy, ol' boy? Been havin' reg'lar ol' picnic! Thought you wasn't comin'—" His voice trailed off and he frowned vaguely, peering about for the bottle that had rolled beneath the bunk.

Lou Bishop laughed his contempt.

"Well," he said, "there's my part of the bargain and welcome to it. Just be damned sure you hold up your end, mister! Before I'm through, Durand and his cronies will wish they'd thought twice before they burned Lou Bishop out!"

Carter's eyes had closed and his head was drooping toward his chest as Sheridan bent and lifted the man, drawing one of Dane's arms about his neck. Carter sagged against him as Jim held him erect. For one long moment Sheridan met the steady, challenging gaze of Lou Bishop's eyes.

"We made a deal, Lou, but that doesn't mean we're pardners in any sense of the word! As long as you stay clear of the Diamond, the Diamond will let you alone. I'm not siding the Rocking Chair as long as Durand's in control. But get this, Bishop! The Rocking Chair belongs to Anne Taylor! And as long as it does, you'll keep this on a personal footing between yourself and Durand. There'll be no raids on the ranch house and no running off Rocking Chair stock!"

Bishop's gaze had grown thin above the defiant features of the Indian girl he held.

He said softly, "I ain't bothering any Rocking Chair stock that stays on that range. But burning my ranch buildings don't mean I'm out of business. If Durand runs cattle across the Smoke onto Bar B grass, I won't answer for his tally. You can tell him that when you see him. I'll bust up the first herd that crosses the river and gun down every Rocking Chair man I find on my grass!"

For a further moment Sheridan held the man's gaze. He turned then, supporting Dane Carter's limp form, and moved heavily toward the door. . . .

THE full darkness of night had closed down when Sheridan rode into the yard of the Diamond spread headquarters two days after he had brought Dane Carter back. The lighted windows of house and bunkhouse cast oblong patches across dusty earth, invading the shadows of corral and barn. He swung down and unsaddled, turning his mount into the corral. He had washed up in one of the tin wash basins on the bench before the bunkhouse when Eve Hammond's voice called from the back door of the house.

"Jim! Is that you, Jim? Will you come inside for a moment, please?"

Toweling, he glanced up as Hank Olsen came out to lean against the bunkhouse door. The older rider said nothing, rolling himself a smoke. His left arm was still in a sling as a result of the wound he'd received at the head of the Bar B canyon the week before. Sheridan crossed the yard and went into the house.

"Jim—" Eve stood before the dark fireplace in the living room, pushing the

charred edges of a burned-out log with the toe of her boot as Sheridan came into the room. "I've got something I want to tell you, but—" Her voice trailed off, as though she were uncertain of what she had to say, or unsure of herself in saying it.

Sheridan let himself down on the leather arm of a chair. Though he had a notion of what she was going to say, he did not attempt to prompt her, nor make it easier for her. He sat quietly, studying the trim lines of her figure in the dark riding skirt and bright red shirt she wore. Impatiently then she turned, the deep blue of her eyes sparking against him with more than a tinge of defiance.

"I am going to marry Dane! Now, tonight! Or at least as early tomorrow as possible!"

Jim Sheridan knew that she was closely watching his face for the reaction. She was still the spoiled child whose vanity demanded that she should dominate those she faced. But right now Sheridan felt only a dull fatigue. He came to his feet, pulling tobacco and papers from a pocket, and slowly rolled a smoke.

"Well, Eve," he finally said, "what do you want me to do?"

There was the immediate chill look of affront upon her features that he had known she would assume.

"What do I want you to do? Is that all you have to say?" There was distinct anger now in her voice.

Sheridan laughed abruptly. He had a feeling that all the years since he had first come to Diamond had merely rolled on to become the past, making no impression whatever on Eve.

He said, "You can hardly call this a surprise. Haven't you planned to marry him all along?"

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CHAPTER IX

A New Foreman Takes Over

WELL enough Sheridan knew that Eve was angry at him because he was not reacting as she wished. Yet suddenly, and surprisingly to this lean, dark-haired man who had been foreman of Diamond for over five years, what Eve Hammond wanted did not seem unduly important. The fatigue in him now was not merely the result of a long, hard day in the saddle. And she would not have liked his reaction now as Jim Sheridan realized that Eve and the glory of Eve, the very thoughts of the girl which had for so many years been able to kindle his hunger and desire, were beginning to fade from his life.

Facing her angry impatience across the room, Sheridan wonderingly knew that this was so. And in this same moment he saw that Eve herself had perceived this change in him. It was as though she had received a signal of his sudden defection. She paled and her chin tilted defiantly. Her full lips thinned. And Eve Hammond swung around toward the foot of the stairway in the hall in quick strides.

"Dane!" she called. "Dane, come down here at once!"

She stood stiffly erect, her back to Jim, as she waited. A door opened above and Dane Carter came down. He was smiling, jovial, the incident of the outlaw cabin a forgotten chapter as he stopped at the foot of the stair. He had this power, Dane, a man who rode the heights or the depths, in whom profound misery could, with improved fortune, turn in a day to carefree abandon and a full sense of security in life. He was tall, handsome and carefully dressed, in clothes he had long ago got in the habit of leaving at the Diamond for whatever event might call for them.

He said, "Whoa, girl! Looks like some-

body put a burr under your saddle for sure!" His smile crossed the room to Jim. "Been abusing my woman, feller? Careful she don't sink those claws of hers into your hide!"

"Tell him, Dane! You're the man on this place now! You tell him we won't have any need for a foreman after tonight!"

There was the sound of angry triumph in her voice as she whirled around to face Sheridan. Carter's smile thinned as he spoke.

"Slow down, woman! I thought this hitching job was supposed to come off tomorrow! And what's all this about not needing a foreman? Gal, do you realize that—"

"I realize that we're going to be married tonight and that you're going to run the Diamond from now on!" Eve looked directly at Jim, though she spoke to Dane. "You've been anxious to get it over with and get your hands on the Diamond. Well, here's your chance! Tell him to draw his pay. You're the boss-man now!"

In spite of himself Sheridan felt an empty, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. Idly he wondered how long this thing had been building up in Eve. He had thought he'd known the limits of her vanity, of that petulance and false pride that had always lain beneath the surface. But this deliberate setting of Dane against him, merely to avenge himself for what she had seen in his eyes a few moments before—this was truly an Eve he had never known.

Yet there was no anger in Jim. He moved across the room deliberately and flipped his smoke into the fireplace.

He said, "It's not that easy, Eve, even if you really want it that way, which I don't think you do. There's trouble building up here in the basin. Big trouble. So big that the Diamond might go under if things are not handled right. I've talked to the men. A lot of them have worked with me and under me for nearly ten years. They'll stand and fight, if necessary. But Dane here knows what would happen if we try to change foremen now. A man is peculiar about his loyalties. Dane can tell you that as well as I."

"Are you trying to tell me that you'd pull my crew off the Diamond if I fired you, Mr. Sheridan?" Fury sparked in the girl's eyes as she moved toward him.

"Take it easy, girl!" Carter was having trouble keeping a laugh in his tone. "Nobody's trying to tell you anything except how things stand. Good Lord, you know Durand and McCulley would like nothing better than to get rid of Jim!"

"You!" She whirled on Dane. "Don't tell me you haven't got the guts to ramrod the Diamond now, after whining around for the chance for over two years!"

Sheridan did not miss the quick, embarrassed glance Dane shot his way.

"It's not a matter of whether I can or not. It's a matter of what's best for the ranch!" Carter's face was red and he avoided looking at Jim. "Besides which, you know Jim's taken most of his pay in stock ever since we were kids. His interest in the Diamond is damned near as big as your own!"

EVE took a step backward, staring at Dane. There was obvious contempt in her voice when she spoke again.

"Maybe I made a mistake in you, Mr. Carter. To listen to you tell it, you were madly in love with me. Your greatest aim in life was to marry me and run the Diamond yourself. Now, when the chips are down, I'm beginning to see how Lou Bishop and the boys in the Longhorn Saloon have been taking you into camp so easily all these years!"

In spite of Dane's many weaknesses and defections, Sheridan felt sorry for the man. That the girl was of a stronger fiber than Dane was plainly evident. Yet Carter seemed to become aware of his own danger, seemed to realize the true value of the stakes for which he played. Jim was surprised, and pleased in spite of himself, when Dane Carter marshaled his courage, conquering his own weakness before Eve.

Dane straightened, dropping all attempts at levity and humor. His eyes sparked with determination as he spoke.

"Listen to me, woman! I've told you a

lot of things and every one of them true, understand? Whether you believe it or not I *do* want to marry you, and tonight's as good a time as any. And I'll run the Diamond, too! But there's no sense going off half cocked like a brainless schoolgirl and doing something you'll kick yourself for five minutes later. Now if you'll get your coat we'll ride into town and get this thing done proper!"

Jim knew that Dane had purposely whipped himself into as much of a temper as possible in order to hold his ground. How much of this Eve sensed he could not tell. But her own anger, deeper and more genuine than Dane's could ever be, had not entirely subsided. She faced Jim defiantly as the sound of hoofbeats drew up in the yard outside.

"Mister, you can cut your own tally come roundup! Now pack your stuff and get off the Diamond! Tonight, understand? I don't want to see you around the ranch in the morning!"

Sheridan felt again that hollowness in the pit of his stomach. But he smiled and shook his head.

"You'll change your mind before morning, lass. You'll need my help, even if Dane's running the show."

"Now, Eve—" Dane's pretense of anger was draining away.

"Shut up!" she said, without taking her eyes from Jim's face. She moved swiftly then, stepping forward and raising her hand. She slapped Sheridan across the face, using the palm, then the back of her hand as a man would swing.

"Get out!" she ordered. "I never want to see you again!"

With the brief pain of her blows stinging his face, Sheridan heard a knock and saw the door open. Ozzie Gilman came in. For a second no one spoke. Ozzie looked meaningfully at Jim.

"What is it?" Eve demanded. "You can speak to me. I'm your employer, you know!" Her voice was harsh with the anger that was still in her. Ozzie looked his question at Jim, but he said,

"Mike Durand's got five hundred head of Rocking Chair stock bunched for a push across the river onto Bar B grass at dawn." When no one spoke, he added, "We found Frank Alberson, Jim. He was lying in the grass up on Cottonwood Creek with two bullet-holes in his back!"

Without a word to Dane or Eve, both struck dumb with astonishment, Jim Sheridan walked out, followed by Ozzie. He saddled a horse and mounted.

Sheridan rode easily in the saddle, listening to the occasional remarks of Ozzie Gilman at his side, and watching the distant lights of Basin City move slowly nearer across the wide expanse of the valley floor. Ozzie, he reflected, was taking the whole thing much more seriously than he was himself.

THE little tophand growled as they splashed across Gopher Creek and on toward town. "I don't give a damn what you say, I say it's only right to tell Eve what kind of a man she's getting before it's too late! Dane started sliding down-

Epitaph

Here lies the body of Tenderfoot Tim,
The victim of bloody slaughter—
"I'm thirsty, bo!" said a bandit to him,
And the poor boob gave him—water!

—Pecos Pete

hill the day he left the Diamond and struck out on his own, and he hit bottom a long time back!"

"It wouldn't do any good, son." There was a hint of humor in Sheridan's tone. He had deliberately forced himself to lay anger aside when the two of them had ridden away from Diamond. This was a habit he had carefully nurtured, knowing that emotion fogged a man's reason, leading him to acts he would later regret.

He said, "Eve wouldn't listen to the Lord himself right now. You'd just get yourself fired for your trouble."

"But hell, Jim! Everybody in the basin's onto him but her! I say you should have left him over the pass and good riddance instead of covering up for him the way you did. Maybe Durand can't *prove* Dane was in it with Jeffers, but he knows and word gets around! And what leg will that leave the Diamond to stand on when things get rough? A night-riding rustler in the saddle puts the Diamond in the wrong right from the start!"

Sheridan frowned, and in his voice was a more ominous tone.

"There are more night-riding sons on the Smoke than Dirk Jeffers and Dane. Three men have been shot in the back in the last ten days. And don't forget it was Mike Durand who blasted things open without bothering about proof! The way things stand right now, if a U.S. marshal should be sent up from Denver Lou Bishop would be the only man on the Smoke who was absolutely in the clear!"

Gilman snorted. "Yeah, he's about as innocent as the rattler was with the rabbit! What's this with you and Bishop anyway? For five years you and him's been at each other's throats. Now all of a sudden you'd think you was old saddle pards. You know damned well that Jeffers could never have operated if Lou hadn't at least okayed the deal!" He paused and spat, adding, "What makes you so sure Bishop didn't gun down Johnny and old man Taylor?"

"I talked to the man, Ozzie." Sheridan was staring unseeingly at the nearing lights of the town. "Things didn't add up that way. You may not believe it, but Bishop's got less use for Dirk Jeffers than you have yourself. There's something there, something between Lou and Jeffers that we don't know about. I'm not saying Bishop knew nothing about Dirk's operations on basin stock. But I'm convinced that he had nothing to do with it himself, and I'm positive that he never knew about either killing until he was told."

After a moment's silence, he said, "I don't entirely trust the man. But he's been here five years. He's worked hard and done a damned good job on the Bar B. Jeffers showed up only a year ago. We didn't miss any stock to speak of before that. And Dane was getting along pretty well before that, too. Still, it's not that easy."

He turned and looked directly at Ozzie.

"The fact remains that two men here in the valley have suddenly come into power through the deaths of their boss and pardner. And it was these same two men who ranted for action against Bishop and took it the minute the boss and the pardner of each was out of the way. The Diamond stood in their way, too, and it could be that Watkins was killed to throw the blame on Bishop. I say there's a hell of a lot more than coincidence here and some skulking sons who are a lot more dangerous to the Diamond than any two-bit rustler like Jeffers on the prowl!"

THEY had come within the radius of the first lights of the town before Ozzie spoke again.

"Then you figure Mike's our boy? Mike and McCulley, Jim?"

Sheridan shrugged. "It'll take a lot more figuring before we can cinch the deal. I never saw a night rider yet who didn't slip up sooner or later and tip his hand."

"But what about the girl and Dane? If she stands by her guns on what she said tonight you know damned well that's the beginning of the end for the Diamond! Carter wouldn't stand a ghost's chance in hell of ramming the spread by himself. In a week or a month Durand would have another herd bunched, only this time it

would be Diamond grass he'd be taking instead of Bar B!"

Sheridan drew up suddenly, looking directly across at his friend. They had stopped just short of the first business houses along the street and in the dim light that reached this far Ozzie Gilman could see the intent, serious look upon the foreman's weather-lined face. He was an easy-going man, Jim Sheridan. That, Ozzie had always known. Sometimes too easy for his own good, Ozzie had often suspected. But there were times, too, as none knew better than Ozize, when Jim Sheridan's square, dark features seemed to tighten upon the bones of his face as they did now, when the solid force of his gaze sharpened upon a man and it was wise to listen to each word he said. Ozzie listened now.

"Hell is about to break loose here in the basin, feller, and I want to get a few things straight right now. Regardless of what happens, I'm playing the Diamond through to the end. Whether Eve sticks to her guns or not is beside the point. If I'm fired, I'm fired. But I've put too much of my life into the Diamond to walk off and watch her go under. Remember that.

"You, now, you're another matter. I know what you've got in mind, but you're wrong. I need you all right, but I need you on the Diamond, even if I have to ride off. You're right about Dane. You've always been right. He wouldn't last long enough to get started if he tried to run things alone. Durand is out after the whole shebang and he'll probably do some killing and have to take some himself before he's done.

"So remember this, old son. If I'm fired and maybe have to do a little night-riding on my own, I want you on the Diamond. No matter how you feel about Dane. We'll whip this little soiree, you and me. We'll tame her down and put a saddle on her and ride her for a fare-thee-well before we're through!"

Sheridan rode on along the street. Ozzie followed, not liking what he had just heard. He did not object, knowing in his heart that Sheridan was right. But he felt a greater bitterness and contempt for the man who once had been his friend and whose weakness and selfishness had heaped misfortune and unhappiness upon the head of a far more worthy man. And so Ozzie Gilman's hatred for Dane Carter lengthened its root.

CHAPTER X

Misplaced Loyalty

KNOWING that the Rocking Chair outfit was in town, Jim Sheridan idly counted the animals at the rack as he reined slowly past the Longhorn Saloon. Durand had brought most of his crew in with him. A stray gleam of light picked out the Circle M brand on the hip of one of the mounts. Of course, Tom McCulley would be bellied up at the bar beside Mike Durand.

Sheridan mused briefly upon the possibility that Durand had steeled the red-faced McCulley to the act of drygulching his partner. He wondered, too, if McCulley actually thought he would gain anything by kowtowing to a man like Durand. He smiled bitterly. He had badly underestimated Durand.

As Sheridan passed the Longhorn an indistinct figure moved out of the shadows and passed through the swinging doors. The sound of voices and a man's husky laughter pushed out to the street. Sheridan knew he would not have much time now. The Rocking Chair rider who had been watching outside was likely letting his boss know right now that the foreman of the Diamond had hit town.

He glanced in at the stable, saw the Taylor rig and rode on, to swing down at the rack before the Virginia Hotel. He had stepped up to the walk, Ozzie beside him, when he saw a slender girl, her arms laden with bundles, coming out of Wilson's store.

He nodded at Ozzie and said, "Some of the Diamond boys will be coming in with Dane and Eve. Might be a good idea if they steered clear of the Longhorn. No use stirring up trouble for nothing."

He left Ozzie and turned down the walk toward the girl. She saw him a dozen steps away, and her glance shifted involuntarily toward the door of the Longhorn before her eyes came back to his face. Sheridan stopped before her, smiling, and reaching casually for the bundles she held.

"It's a warm evening, Anne. Too warm for a lady to cart such a load."

He studied her face in the indifferent light of the street. She was tense, and he sensed her apprehension. With a sudden stir of anger he wondered if Mike Durand had attempted to force his will upon this girl since her father's death. This idea, however, quickly passed. Durand, he knew, had worshiped Anne too long, had established himself too many years before as her personal guardian, to chance losing what slender hopes he had of her returning his affection by any untoward act.

Her face had been pale in the first moment she saw Jim. Now beneath his steady scrutiny color came into her cheeks. Her wide, full lips brought a quick memory of the tender sweetness of her kiss the last time he had seen her at the Rocking Chair.

He said abruptly, "I don't know if I've mentioned it, but you're a beautiful girl, Anne."

"Please! Not here!" Anxiety was in her voice and again she glanced fleetingly at the Longhorn. "We shouldn't be seen talking together. I—it's Mike, Jim. I never knew he hated you so. Please! He's sure to cause trouble!"

She touched his arm, urging him forward as she hurried along the walk toward the hotel. Sheridan followed her through the lobby and upstairs to the room Henry Taylor had always reserved for his daughter whenever she might be in town. He moved past her and deposited the bundles he carried upon the square, carved oak stand near the window. Turning, he saw that though the look of immediate urgency no longer was in her face that she was still hesitant, unsure, as though she were uncomfortable in his presence.

Seeing her here in this room with its bright frill of curtains and bedspread, a room which through much personal use over the years had become as much her own as her bedroom at the Rocking Chair, Jim Sheridan felt a deep sympathy for this girl whose personality was so irrevocably enmeshed with his own memories of the past.

In spite of her uncertainty there was about her for the big foreman that aura of someone long beloved; endearing and endeared. If, he thought, he were to search his mind for people of warmth he had known, this girl would surely stand foremost among them. He crossed to her, sympathetic and tender, conscious of how alone she was, and took her in his arms.

THOUGH she submitted, offering her lips for his kiss, she did not respond, but stood passively, eyes closed, within his embrace. He stepped back immediately, frowning, sensing her thoughts. She moved guiltily to the window and stood looking down into the street.

"I—I'm sorry, Jim. I guess I'm not feeling up to myself tonight."

Guilt, too, stirred briefly in Sheridan. He'd had no right to demand a kiss. She had neither encouraged him nor given any sign that such a thing was desirable to her. He had overstepped the bounds of their friendship, impelled perhaps by the memory of those few minutes immediately following her father's death when she had broken down and had sought comfort in his arms. He cursed his own lack of insight, but spoke gently as he moved up beside her at the window.

"Has Durand been causing you trouble?"

There was a definite look of surprise on her face.

"Trouble? Mike Durand? Jim, you know better than that."

He flushed and remained uncomfortably silent.

She said, "He hates you, though, Jim. I never realized how much until recently." She turned from regarding the street, to look at him directly. "Why? What's behind it all? What's wrong between you and Mike, Jim?"

He avoided her gaze, seeing a man pass by on the far side of the street and the cigarette glow of another in the shadows near the stable beyond. He realized that she was unaware of Durand's overwhelming possessiveness and jealousy where she was concerned. Was she as blind to the man's driving ambition?

He said, "Have you thought of selling the Rocking Chair, Anne? Of leaving the basin? Perhaps returning East?"

Anne Taylor frowned. She stared at Sheridan's profile.

"Sell the Rocking Chair?" She sounded shocked. "Why, Jim Sheridan, I think you must be out of your mind! Why on earth would I ever want to sell the Rocking Chair?"

Sheridan's discomfort grew. He forced himself to meet her gaze.

"What is there here for you, Anne? Living alone in a big house with no friends in miles. I thought perhaps that back in Virginia—"

"Really, Jim!" She laughed. "The Rocking Chair is my home! Why, I wouldn't any more think of selling the ranch than I would my—my clothes, or my—" She broke off abruptly, peering at him in sudden suspicion. "Why do you ask me such a foolish thing? There's something wrong! What is it, Jim? Is it what's standing between you and Mike?"

Sheridan drew a deep breath. He had not thought she would be so blind to what was taking place in the valley.

He said, "Can't you see it, Anne? Can't you see what's coming? Why do you think Mike Durand and Tom McCulley burned Lou Bishop out? There's a range war about to explode here on the Smoke and Durand is lighting the match!"

"A range war?" There was disbelief in her look, then disdain. "Jim, I didn't know you were so excitable! As for Bishop, he and his friend Dirk Jeffers were caught rustling our cattle, weren't they? What do you expect us to do with rustlers—invite them over to dinner? This isn't like you, Jim. Why should a range war start over running a few rustlers out of the country?"

Sheridan shook his head.

"That's not it. Perhaps Jeffers ran off a few head of our stock—maybe a lot more than a few. But we never caught him at it, let alone Bishop. You see, Anne, Mike jumped the gun. He talked McCulley into riding with him against the Bar B without any proof that Lou Bishop was anything more or less than the rancher he's been all along. Without sanction of any kind he burned down a neighbor's ranch house and buildings and killed two men of that neighbor's crew. A thing like this would look pretty bad before a court of law."

There was sheer disbelief in her eyes.

"But—but Mike told me they had absolute proof that Lou Bishop and Dirk Jeffers were responsible for all the rustling that's been going on!"

AGAIN Jim shook his head.

"Nothing but suspicion—and that's pretty slim evidence, considering the numbers of outlaws who ride the high hills and could easily make off with a few head now and then. But all that's in the past. The harm has been done. The point now is that Mike has scattered Bishop's stock into the hills and the badlands south of the valley and has bunched a herd of Rocking Chair cattle to cross the river onto Bar B range."

Watching the girl, he could tell that little he was saying was actually being driven home. He knew that in her ignorance of what had transpired she was shocked and found it hard to believe what he was telling her.

"Why—why, what you're telling me would mean that Mike Durand has become an outlaw! That he—and myself as well, for he is my foreman—" But she shook her head, her eyes flaming as she made denial.

"I don't believe it! No matter what you say, I won't believe that Mike Durand

would do such a thing! And what about Mr. McCulley? And Mr. Alberson? Why would they join in on such a—a raid unless they had proof that Lou Bishop was in on the rustling with Jeffers?"

"McCulley, Anne. Only Tom McCulley. He'd go along with any man, law or no law, if he thought it would make him a profit. Frank Alberson was shot dead on Cottonwood two days ago!"

Though her eyes widened, he saw that she still stood firm in denying Mike Durand's guilt. He realized that she had grown up under the guidance of that man to a large extent and would be deeply loyal to one who had never shown her anything but affection.

Yet deep within him Sheridan strongly desired that Anne Taylor be no party, either by intent or accident, to the deeds both performed and planned by her foreman. That was why he'd had to see Anne tonight. He had hoped, by setting her straight about the state of affairs in the valley at present, she might either check Durand, or if she didn't denounce his actions, would declare that she—and thus, legally, the Rocking Chair—would have no part in whatever unlawful acts Durand might forcibly perform in the future.

This was of the utmost importance to Jim. For if he was certain of anything in this world he was certain that Mike Durand, in attacking the Bar B, had touched off a train of events that was certain to lead not only to his own destruction but to that of all those who willingly associated themselves with him in his endeavors.

Jim Sheridan himself knew that he would oppose Durand to the end, whether as foreman of the Diamond, or as a lone rider whose one aim would be to see that no man could use murder and force as weapons against a neighbor and go unscathed.

Only minutes after he had told Anne about Frank Alberson's murder, the rapid, drumming sounds of horses' hoofs came up from the street below. It sounded as though a dozen or more riders were sweeping into the town.

Sheridan said, "You've got to see it, Anne! You've got to get it straight! If you let Mike push that herd across the Smoke, it will be the same as backing his play. If you don't stop him now, or at least try, you may lose everything you own."

She met his gaze steadily as the sharp, flat explosions of shots broke above the clamor of running hoofs and shouting men.

"I have told you I didn't believe anything you said about Mike. I still don't and I won't until I hear it from Mike himself! I don't know what you're thinking, to tell me things like this, urging me to sell the ranch and hinting that Mike might be mistreating me. But I'll tell you this, Jim Sheridan! The Rocking Chair is my home, not my prison, whatever you might think! And as long as it is, I think you can safely leave the running of our affairs to Mike Durand and to me!"

Sheridan felt the warm blood flush his face beneath the girl's gaze. He knew that he had failed, both in warning her against Durand, and in trying to protect her against whatever the future might have in store.

As he turned away he heard Denver's laughing shout from the street amid the firing of more guns. He closed the door behind him and walked down the stairs, realizing dimly that the Diamond outfit had come to town and was preparing to celebrate the wedding of the owner, Eve Hammond, to Dane Carter, owner of the Pothook brand.

CHAPTER XI

Ambush That Failed

IN THE Virginia Hotel, the main stairway dropped down to a landing midway between the two floors, descending then in the opposite direction to the lobby. It was upon this landing that Jim Sheridan stopped, shaken awake from his musings when he saw

Mike Durand, followed by two Rocking Chair riders, stride through the lobby door and toward the foot of the stairs. Outside could be heard the laughing raillery of men's voices as a dozen or more riders swung in to the rack before the hotel. The batwing doors of the Virginia Bar slapped open and booted feet stamped into the saloon adjoining the lobby as voices were lifted louder.

Neither Durand nor the two men with him had as yet seen Sheridan on the landing above. Durand, his homely, horselike features set in a scowl of displeasure, stopped at the foot of the stairs. He hesitated, glancing sharply toward the open archway that connected the lobby with the saloon.

One of the Rocking Chair hands said, "Maybe we better go a little easy, Boss. With all these Diamond rannies in town—"

"Shut up!" Durand's sibilant order cut the man off. "When I want your advice, Toomey, I'll ask for it. You, Evans, get out back under the stairs. And see he don't get past you, savvy?"

The rider moved quickly past the stairway toward the rear of the hotel. In the moment before Durand turned back to mount the stairs, Sheridan's eyes never left the man whose ambitions, Jim felt sure, already had been responsible for the deaths of three men.

Durand, close to forty, was round of shoulder, with a jutting chin and weather-burned features that seldom wore a smile. Wearing a tattered sheepskin coat and dusty black hat, his jawline dark with three days' beard, he looked more like a saddle tramp than the foreman of one of the largest ranches in over a hundred miles.

To Sheridan Mike Durand's intentions now were crystal clear. Mike knew that Sheridan had entered the hotel with Anne Taylor a few minutes before. And one more killing would mean little to Mike Durand, a dangerous man, if it furthered his aims.

It struck Jim Sheridan in this tense moment that it was ironic how, during this past year he had centered his antagonism and distrust upon Lou Bishop while he had catalogued Durand as a respectable rancher.

Sheridan drew in his breath as the man below him turned.

He said, "You won't have to go any further, Mike—not if you're looking for me."

Surprise widened Mike Durand's eyes then instantly, his face became impassive as he removed his foot from the bottom stair.

He said, "Reckon you're right, Sheridan. This is about far enough."

And even as the last word dropped from his lips, amid laughter and the shouts of well-wishers, Dane Carter and Eve Hammond stepped through the archway into the hotel lobby. Denver's voice from the bar shouted something about rousing the preacher as the couple stopped short, watching the scene on the stairs.

From the corner of his glance Sheridan saw the instant sobering effect Durand's presence had upon both Eve and Dane. Laughter drained from Carter's face and it blanched with fear. Though annoyance tugged at Durand, the foreman of the Rocking Chair paid no attention to the pair across the room.

HE SAID, "I hear you had some business up in the pass last week, Sheridan. Way I got the story, you rode up alone, but you didn't come back by yourself."

In spite of himself, Sheridan felt a certain admiration for the man's iron nerve. In the saloon beyond a dozen Diamond riders were lined along the bar. Now Ozzie Gilman moved through the wide front door, stopping inside. The Rocking Chair rider beside Durand moved his feet nervously.

"I'll tell you now, Sheridan," Durand went on as though the two of them were alone. "Any man that comes out of the pass, or any man who has anything to do with them that's up there, is an enemy of the Rocking Chair. I went to considerable trouble running off that pack of longloopers and the first one shows his face

down this way will die by his rope, or the gun!"

It was clear to Sheridan that Durand knew the identity of the man he had brought back from Bear Pass. This knowledge, and the apprehension it brought, flickered in the eyes of handsome, clean-shaven Dane Carter.

But to Jim Sheridan the time had come to state his case. There was no further question now in his mind of avoiding hostilities. This man before him was a threat to the existence of the Diamond far more than any rustler crew.

He said, "You fired the first shot on the Smoke, Durand. As I've told you before, you'll live to regret it. You burned a man out and killed two men of his crew without any proof he'd done anything unlawful. Now you've got a herd bunched to push across the river onto that man's grass. You can't do it, Durand! The minute you cross that river with one head of Rocking Chair stock you show your true colors. We both know you've always wanted Bar B grass. Next it will be Pothook, Circle M, Diamond. If you try to cross that river I'll stop you, and I won't be alone when I do!"

For a full minute no one spoke. Durand, anger showing in the dull red of his cheeks, glanced at Eve Hammond and back to Jim.

"Are you talking as the foreman of the Diamond, or as just another saddle tramp?" he demanded.

Surprise welled up in Sheridan. How had the man heard of what had taken place at Diamond less than two hours before? He saw Durand look at Eve, his words challenging and underlaid with threat.

"Am I to take it that you'll throw your men against the Rocking Chair, Miss Hammond? Are you going to listen to a man who's thrown in with an outlaw like Bishop, and ride against your neighbors like he'd have you do?"

"What do you mean, thrown in with Bishop?" Eve looked the foreman of the Rocking Chair straight in the eyes.

"Ask him." Durand's voice was suddenly purring as he sensed his advantage. "McCulley and some of his boys spotted your foreman coming down from Bear Pass."

Eve's glance lifted to Sheridan then. He saw in her face the same willfulness and anger she had exhibited out at the ranch.

"I thought you told me you rode to Miles City after Dane!" she accused. Then, turning to Dane, she demanded, "Did you or did you not see Jim in Miles City? Did he bring you back like you both told me?"

Carter's face reddened beneath her stare. Sheridan knew Dane would not have the nerve to admit he had never been in Miles City, but had agreed with Jim to tell that story in order to keep secret his connection with Jeffers and the men in Bear Pass. Sheridan caught the look of contempt on Ozzie Gilman's face as Dane spoke.

"Well—not exactly, honey. I—I kind of stumbled into him down on this side of the rim." Dane was flushed, and his eyes carefully avoided the man on the stairs above and the sandy-haired tophand who had once been his friend.

"Then why did you lie to me? Why, Dane?"

"Well, Jim seemed to think it would be a good idea to say he'd met me in Miles City so—" His voice trailed off.

EVE'S eyes flashed defiance at Jim. She spoke to the foreman of the Rocking Chair.

"Earlier tonight I discharged Mr. Sheridan as foreman of the Diamond! I see now that I had even greater reason than I had at the time. Dane Carter and I are going to be married tonight, and from now on you can consider him as in control of my affairs!"

The echoes of a jeering, ironic fate brushed Jim Sheridan's mind as he looked down on the defiant Eve Hammond. He could hardly believe that this was the same Eve he had once hoped to marry, upon whom he had centered all his desires and dreams of the future. He saw

now only petty vanities and wilful, immature pride which he once had taken for gaiety and lightness of spirit.

There was triumph and deep satisfaction in Mike Durand's voice when he rumbled, "Well, mister, looks like you're out on your own. Now we'll see how much weight you carry!"

He stepped back from the foot of the stairs, his expression hardening as his glance went past Jim.

"All right, Evans! Bring him down!"

eyes from Sheridan. The Rocking Chair rider in the lobby kept his hands carefully away from his gun. A man cursed from the saloon archway. Then Slim Neal, Denver and several more Diamond hands were pushing into the lobby.

Ozzie Gilman said, "You're a little bit out of your depth, Durand! Call your boy down."

After a full minute's hesitation, Durand nodded and the rider behind Jim came down the stairs. Angry red once more

Over the Western Grapevine

By Harold Helfer

•

THE OVERLAND TRAIL, shortest and easiest cross-country route for wagon trains, over which hundreds of thousands of settlers traveled, was the principal artery of wild animals centuries before the white man ever saw it.

AT THE AGE OF 16, BUFFALO BILL rode the pony express 384 miles continually, stopping only for a change of horses. It happened because the rider who was to have relieved him had been scalped.

THE SPINELESS CACTUS of the desert produces a larger crop per acre than any other plant known to man—and makes excellent fodder.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK in Wyoming contains more geysers than all the rest of the world combined.

JAMES W. MARSHALL, the man who discovered gold in California and brought about the fabulous gold rush, died a pauper. He was just never able to latch on to the yellow stuff and things went from bad to worse for him.

Sheridan had been standing at the edge of the landing. He had completely forgotten the rider Durand had sent out back. There was a sharp sound as a weapon clicked on full cock less than three feet from his ear. Turning his head he saw the man standing half-way down the upper flight of stairs.

"Not so fast, Durand!"

Ozzie Gilman was in it now, his weapon springing to hand as he moved further into the lobby. Durand did not take his

showed on the Rocking Chair foreman's face. He spoke to Eve.

"You letting your boys make this play?" he demanded. "I thought you said Sheridan was through!"

"Ozzie, put up that gun!" Eve marched forward, facing the little tophand furiously. Dane neither spoke nor moved. She said, "And the rest of you men—we have no argument with the Rocking Chair, understand? You're to take your orders from Dane from now on! Is that clear?"

Dane Carter's face was beet red as he stood there with the gaze of every man in the room on him. He laughed, but it was forced, betraying effort.

He said, "What the hell, men! We've got no argument here. We came to town for a wedding and, by thunder, we're going to have it!" He faced Durand and though he was smiling his face muscles were stiff.

"Durand, you can pass the word that the Rocking Chair is invited. We're holding the shebang right here just as soon as old Pearson shows up to tie the knot!"

The silence that greeted Dane's words was painful. In this embarrassing moment Jim Sheridan could not help but feel sorry for this man whose weaknesses had totaled a greater sum than his strength.

Ozzie Gilman had not moved, nor taken his eyes from Durand. He said, "I'll have no part of—"

"You heard what the lady said, Ozzie!" Sheridan came down from the landing, his gaze commanding the little tophand, reminding Ozzie of what he had said earlier. "You'll take your orders from Dane!" He stopped on the last step of the staircase, looking at Mike Durand. "I'm through as foreman of Diamond," he said, "but that may not mean what you think. I've got a stake in this basin, amounting to nearly two thousand head. And I aim to protect that stake!"

His glance crossed the room to Carter. "Dane," he said, "a few months back you offered to sell me your layout in case you married Eve. Is that offer still good?"

DANE CARTER saw in Sheridan's gaze on him the knowledge of all that he was, and all that he had done, and that Jim Sheridan held the power to reveal him in all his nakedness to Eve and the world. This, he knew, was no question that Sheridan asked, but a command plain and simple. He swallowed hard, and forced the reluctant muscles of his face to a grin.

"Sure, Jim. You know that—"

"Dane! No!" Eve's anger swung to the man she had chosen to marry.

"As I said, Durand," Sheridan cut in, "things may not be as cut and dried as you think. I'm taking over the Pothook right now and I'll cut my own stock out of the Diamond when we roundup next month!"

Fury boiled into Durand's homely face. He stammered and cursed.

"You can't get away with this, Sheridan! The Pothook don't amount to a damn! Hell, McCulley's already—" He broke off suddenly, realizing he had said too much.

Jim Sheridan smiled. "McCulley's already run his stock south onto Pothook graze, eh? Just like you're figuring to do on the Bar B in the morning? You and McCulley would have it pretty soft, running the whole west side of the basin together, wouldn't you, Durand?" He shook his head, his smile thinning as he stared at the man.

"But I'm on the Pothook now, mister! And you can tell McCulley for me that the party is over! And what I said about the Rocking Chair crossing the river still goes. You make your play in the morning, Durand, and you'll run into guns before you get ten head in the water!"

CHAPTER XII

A Waiting Game

MIKE DURAND'S face was roily with anger and hate. He cursed and his hand leaped for the gun on his thigh.

"You're under my gun, mister!" Ozzie Gilman's voice stopped him.

Durand paused, glaring at Jim.

"This does it, Sheridan! You've been riding for this fall a long time!"

He nodded the two Rocking Chair hands toward the door, following deliberately. Ozzie Gilman backed slowly to one side, but did not lower his weapon. Durand

had not reached the door when for the second time this night there came the running beat of horses' hoofs. One of the Rocking Chair riders glanced nervously through the open door as Mike Durand paused, facing Jim Sheridan for a final verbal blast.

"You've shot your bolt on this man's range, ranny! From here on out as far as the Rocking Chair's concerned you're just another night rider like Jeffers and Bishop. As of tomorrow morning everything west of the river is Rocking Chair and Circle M graze. Don't push your luck on this Pothook deal if you want to stay healthy. You're through, Sheridan! I won't say it again!"

As the man turned away the swelling rhythm of drumming hoofs rose to a crescendo in the street outside. The first blast of gunfire slammed without warning against the front of the hotel. The foremost of the two Rocking Chair riders, the man called Evans, yelled in surprise and pain. Staggering back from the impact of the shot that had grazed his scalp slightly, he fell full length across the threshold of the open door. The other man, Toomey, stared white-faced as a bullet went through the flesh of his arm.

In a body the Diamond crew rushed back through the archway into the bar. Outside, a new flurry of firing broke out above the beating rattle of hoofs as the unidentified raiders swept past the Longhorn Saloon. A man screamed and another yelled for his boss.

"Mike! Mike Durand! It's Bishop and his crew! All hell's broke loose!"

As Durand raced into the night the slight, breathless figure of a dark girl appeared in the broad, open door. Wearing the bright, shapeless clothes of a Blackfoot squaw with her shining black hair in braids, the young Indian girl Sheridan had seen in the cabin above Bear Pass hesitated, her dark eyes touching each in the room, then lighting suddenly as she found the one she sought, and hurried toward him.

Her moccasined feet made no whisper upon the floor. She did not speak, but stopped close beside Dane, touching his sleeve shyly. Her smile was secretly possessive as she gazed up at him.

Sheridan, glancing at Eve, saw surprise quickly give way to a mounting tide of fury. Knowing Bishop's contempt for Dane Carter, Jim wondered if the rancher had purposely brought the Indian girl to town to embarrass and compromise Dane. He chuckled inwardly, knowing that this must be so, yet surprised at this quirk of humor in Lou Bishop.

Leaving the others, Sheridan went back through the hotel kitchen and into the night. He smiled wryly. What a wedding night surprise for Eve!

* * * * *

Jim Sheridan lay motionless on his bunk, straining to hear again the sound that had brought him awake. Though it was still daylight the sun had dropped below the crest of the mountains, the first shadows of evening had engulfed the Pothook headquarters and were reaching out across the valley floor.

Except for his boots, Sheridan, exhausted, had slept fully dressed. His gun had come instantly to hand in that first waking moment. Now, as he stared across the single room of the shanty Dane Carter had built, he felt the vibration of horses' hoofs approaching the yard.

He slipped into his boots, buckled belt and holster about his waist, reached for his hat and sheepskin coat from a peg on the wall. As he opened the back door and stepped outside, the hoofbeats swung into the front yard. Sheridan rounded the corner and eased forward along the wall. Gun in hand as he neared the front corner, he stopped as a man shouted his name.

STRAIGHTENING, he stepped into the open. The riders, Lou Bishop and Barney Rade, started in surprise at his appearance from around the house. Bishop's smile came as he leaned an arm on the saddle-horn, cocking his head at Jim.

"Mighty cagey, friend, mighty cagey. Reckon you wasn't exactly expecting a

call?" He shook his head and dismounted, looping his reins over the rail. "Can't say as I blame you none, though, since Durand and McCulley paid you their visit last week. Man in your position best sleep with one eye open and an ear to the ground."

The week before, the second night after Sheridan had taken over Dane Carter's Pothook spread, Durand and McCulley and eight or nine riders had ridden up, and had riddled the house with bullets. Luckily, Sheridan who had been dropping down from the higher hills, had heard the firing.

Cresting the ridge immediately above the house, he had drawn his carbine and sent twenty or thirty shots slamming into the raiders as they milled in the yard. He had dropped one man, who eventually remounted, and had heard the yells of at least two others as his shots drove home. Since that time Durand and McCulley had either found enough to keep them busy elsewhere, or had decided to bide their time and await a more favorable chance at Jim Sheridan.

Holstering his weapon now, Sheridan opened the front door, nodding for Bishop to enter. Barney had stepped down, but Bishop gestured for him to remain on guard outside.

"No sense taking any more chance than we have to, eh?" The rancher came inside, pulling a pint bottle from his hip and glancing at Jim. Sheridan nodded at the table. Bishop picked up a glass and poured a drink for Jim.

"What's on your mind, Bishop?" Jim asked. "Finger still itchy for the trigger?"

The rancher passed over the glass, pouring himself another half full from his bottle. Without speaking he saluted Jim and drank. He made a wry face, set the glass down, and returned the pint to his hip. Sheridan drank, feeling the raw, burning fire of the liquor hit bottom. His blood began to warm.

"Sheridan"—Bishop's expression was suddenly sober—"you've kind of got me in a tight. Ever since that night me and my boys hit the town things have been going from bad to worse. I gave you my word I wouldn't cross the Smoke. Why, I don't know. I don't own you a damned thing. Maybe I thought your way would work out for the best. But now—" He shook his head.

"But now, what?" Sheridan crossed to the doorway as he spoke, his eyes wandering down the slight slope and over the vast flatness of the basin floor. Far to the east the upthrust bluffs of the rim country still caught the afternoon sun. Five miles out on the flat he thought he could see the first twinkle of light from Basin City, now covered in blueing dusk.

He repeated, "Now what, Bishop? Things are no different now than they were seven, eight days ago. I rode out with you the morning after you and your boys hit town. I sided you the next night and the night after that and I'll ride with you again any time the trouble's on this side of the Smoke. But when it comes to crossing the river, I say wait."

"Wait." Bishop laughed without humor, easing himself into a chair. "I've waited a week and what in hell has it got me? Durand crossed the Smoke, didn't he? With at least five hundred head, if not more! How the hell do we know if either this Cattlemen's Association hombre, or the U.S. marshal you sent for will show up? Barney and some of the boys are getting mighty tired of chousing Rocking Chair stock back across the river. They'd like nothing better than a crack at Mr. Durand on his home grounds, and I'm starting to figure they're right!"

For a thoughtful moment Sheridan said nothing, looking through the door. He knew that Bishop was justified in the way he felt. The morning after Bishop's raid in Basin City Sheridan had helped the Bar B patrol the west bank of the Smoke in an attempt to prevent Durand from pushing stock across the river onto Bar B range.

RIGHT after dawn, however, they had discovered that Tom McCulley and his Circle M crew had sneaked the stock across hours earlier, while Durand and

his men were showing themselves in town. McCulley had done a surprisingly thorough job, driving the cattle straight west in a bunch and scattering them into the hills and ravines so completely that it would take a complete roundup crew weeks to chouse them out.

When a man from the Cattlemen's Association arrived, Durand would attempt to claim a portion or all the range west of the river, pointing out the number and penetration of Rocking Chair stock in that area. As the main herd of Lou Bishop's stock had not yet been driven down from the higher benchlands, a tally at present undoubtedly would indicate that the Rocking Chair foreman was telling the truth.

Until now, Sheridan had been able to talk Lou Bishop into remaining on this side of the Smoke—true to the word the man had given when Sheridan himself had sworn to uphold the Bar B's right to the west side of the basin south of the Pothook, and to help Bishop actively against all encroachments upon Bar B range. Riding at night, they had twice scattered groups of Rocking Chair riders who were bedded down west of the Smoke.

By day Sheridan had combed the hills, gullies and ravines above the Pothook, chasing what few head of Pothook cattle he could find out onto the open range, and had grabbed whatever little sleep he got whenever he could. He had legalized his purchase of the cows when he had met Dane in town this last week. Dane had looked sheepish, but had accepted Jim's check. It was through this meeting, too, that Sheridan had discovered that Eve Hammond had once more postponed the wedding.

"Hell, you know how she is, Jim!" The big, curly-haired Dane Carter had attempted to display something of his carefree manner. Jim noted the pouchy flesh beneath the man's eyes and saw that Carter's hand shook when he held a match to his smoke. "She'll come around. It's just that she's got to have her say-so before we get hitched. After it's done, I'll let her know who's boss!"

Sheridan was tempted to ask him what Eve had thought of his having an Indian mistress, but Dane was so obviously desperately in need of a drink that Jim said nothing more and left him there on the street. As he walked away, for the first time Jim Sheridan realized that he no longer felt concerned about Dane, one way or the other. For years they had been the best of friends. Now, irrevocably, Sheridan knew that was done with. He had helped Dane Carter for the last time. From here on Dane was on his own.

SHERIDAN had mailed letters to the Cattlemen's Association in Miles City, and to the United States Marshal's office in Denver. On his way back to the Pothook he had discovered that McCulley had driven a sizable herd of Circle M stock south onto Pothook range. That night he and Bishop and three Bar B riders had raided McCulley's line camp, shooting one man, and had run the greater portion of the stock into the eroded bottomlands along the Smoke.

Now Jim Sheridan was standing in the doorway of his own house, wondering if Lou Bishop wasn't right after all, wondering if there was any use in trying merely to defend their own range until the representatives of law and order arrived. Working his own stock by day and riding against intruders by night had worn down his resistance to Lou Bishop's increasing demands.

He said, "I don't blame you, Lou. Maybe—"

"Hey, Boss!" Barney called from the shadows in the yard, and the next moment was at the door. "I think we're going to have company. Maybe we better fan out?"

Sheridan walked out into the yard, with Bishop at his side. In the hush of evening Jim heard hoofbeats approaching, then caught the vague outlines of two riders coming up the draw. They rode without hesitation or any attempt at concealment. As Barney drew his weapon Sheridan stepped forward quickly, knocking the man's arm down.

A MOMENT later Ozzie Gilman's voice hailed the house. Jim answered and the two riders came on, reining up in the yard. Ozzie regarded the two Bar B men without comment, speaking directly to Jim. He indicated the man at his side with a nod.

"Duffy here rode over from the Rocking Chair. Says he has a message for you, personal. Seems a certain party ain't had the news about the change in management at the Diamond."

Sheridan glanced up at the hunched figure of the man beside Ozzie. He frowned, feeling a jarring sense of apprehension, knowing that Anne Taylor would never send out this ancient Negro servant unless the message he carried was of extreme importance to her. The whites of the Negro's eyes showed plainly against the blackness of his face in the gathering dusk. He fumbled inside his coat and leaned forward, extending a white square to Jim.

"Miss Anne, she said it was mighty impo'tant, Mr. She'dn. Ah done ride this hoss foah 'bout all Ah'm wuth."

"Thank you, Duffy. You'll find coffee inside. Better rest up a while before you ride back."

As the old man climbed down Sheridan stepped quickly inside, lighting the lamp on the table and ripping open the small envelope Duffy had given him. He heard the others come in, but did not look up until he had finished the few brief words that were written in Anne Taylor's neat, precise hand. He met Ozzie's gaze.

"Have you seen Anne in town, or anywhere on the range in the last ten days?"

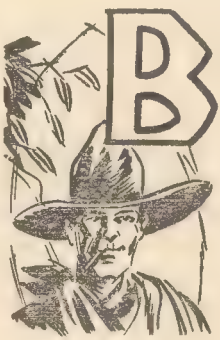
Ozzie shook his head. "Mike Durand paid us a visit three, four days back. Didn't catch what he had to say, but the boss-woman says there'll be no general roundup till spring. I'd say the general idea is to keep you from making your cut."

Sheridan frowned. He needed that cut. It was necessary that he not only market a good herd from the increase of Diamond stock he had taken as part of his pay during the past ten years, but he also needed several hundred head to throw onto his recently acquired Pothook holdings. When the Association man arrived he would demand a tally. It would not look good if Circle M stock appeared to be crowding down from the north and Durand's cattle appeared in increasing numbers to the south while Sheridan attempted to hold the choice central valley west of the river with his few scraggly head of Pothook beef. He had warned Bishop repeatedly of this danger, urging the man to spend more of his time driving his own Bar B stock down from the benchlands so that he would be in a better position to prove his right to his own range.

Lou Bishop, overhearing Ozzie's last words as he came through the door, said, "Looks like our friend on the Rocking Chair's a little smarter than you give him credit for, eh, Sheridan? What do you say now? Still think you can fight him from this side of the Smoke?"

CHAPTER XIII

Single-Handed Battle



BISHOP'S manner and words stirred Sheridan to sudden irritation. The urgency of Anne Taylor's note was strong in his mind. She had written:

> Jim, I will be in town tonight, Saturday, and must see you without fail. Perhaps my home has become more of a prison than I thought.

He turned to Bishop abruptly and said, "Maybe you're right, Lou. Maybe I've gone at this thing the wrong way. How many boys have you got on this side of the slope?"

The rancher's eyes brightened and his smile spread beneath the ragged line of his dark mustache.

"Eight," he said, "but they'll do. Barney

can ride after the rest. Now maybe we'll see some action instead of sitting around on our patience, eh?"

Ozzie said, "You'll never break Durand with nine men. Let me pass the word to the boys. There's not a man on the Diamond wouldn't come and you know it, Jim!"

Sheridan knew that Ozzie was none too happy about his association with Bishop and his crew. Proof or no proof, there was still the matter of Dirk Jeffers and the fact that the outlaw could not have operated without Bishop's knowledge and consent. Sheridan himself had been forced to overlook this temporarily under the pressure of events. Yet he sensed the antipathy between the two men.

"Lou," he said. "You can spot your men at Ford's crossing and wait for word from me." He nodded Ozzie ahead of him to the door. He said, "Durand's played it smart. But he's liable to find that it takes more than that to nail a man's hide to the wall. Come on, Ozzie, let's ride!"

Outside, where Jim's horse was saddled in the corral, ready for him to run, they swung to saddle, and spurred toward the distant lights of Basin City and the boundary of the Smoke River. They made a swift ride to Basin City, and Sheridan headed at once for the Virginia Hotel.

He stopped before Anne Taylor's door in the upstairs hall of the hotel. He rapped twice, softly, hearing through the thin wooden panel the complaint of bedsprings and hesitant steps. Her voice, when it came, sounded husky, as though she had been crying.

"Yes? Who is it? Who's there?"

"Jim, Anne. Jim Sheridan."

The key turned instantly and the door swung back. Anne, wearing a soft blue robe, her eyes swollen and her mouth twisted in pain, rushed into his arms. She buried her head on his chest, sobbing, letting the flood of relief at his presence well up and run its course.

"Jim! Oh, Jim! I thought—I was afraid you couldn't come!"

He held her close, feeling the warmth of her soft body against his own. In his surge of compassion, of instant indignation against any who should cause this girl such pain, Jim Sheridan realized there was no longer any doubt in his mind concerning his true feelings for Anne. This girl he held was more precious to him than all the stock he owned, than any ranch, or any plans he had made. Again he had misjudged Durand, this time upon the score of that man's feeling for Anne. For this error, and for having allowed the girl to return to the Rocking Chair the last time he had seen her, he could not forgive himself.

When her sobbing had ceased he took her shoulders, looking deeply into her eyes. He said seriously, "You will never cry like this again, Anne. If God gives me the strength to prevent it, you will never be hurt this deeply again as long as I live. I love you and want you for my wife, no matter what comes."

"Yes! Oh, yes, Jim! Now and forever!"

She came into his arms once more, but without tears, except those of happiness that welded the two of them in these fleeting moments of their lives. Her lips beneath his own gave him the full, warm promise of what was to be in all time to come.

Long minutes passed before they became conscious of the open door. They moved further inside the room as they closed it, conscious only of each other, oblivious for the time being to the ominous, gathering clouds of reality that threatened their world. . . .

WHEN Sheridan had spoken to Ozzie, telling him the news and watching the eagerness break alive in the tophand's face before Ozzie rode from town, Sheridan paused on the steps of the Virginia Hotel. It was early, of course, but the town was strangely deserted for a Saturday night. Three mounts, where there had been four less than half an hour earlier, stood idly at rack in front of the Longhorn Saloon. This fact registered its significance on Jim's mind as he caught sight of twelve-year-old Bobby Wilson lounging about the front of his father's store. Sheri-

dan whistled briefly, and the boy looked his way and came down the walk.

"How long would it take you to get to Ford's crossing, Bob?"

"Well now, Jim," the boy considered sagely, "I'd say about a whoop and a holler and a half, was you to let me ride that black of yours, now."

"Sorry, Jim. Afraid I can't spare the black right now." He handed the boy two silver dollars. "Tell Jed to give you the chestnut gelding. At Ford's you'll tell the man you'll see there to ride on in."

"Reckon I'll do that, all right." The boy took the money and turned away importantly. He had gone but two or three steps, however, when the game of grown-up faded beneath his eagerness, and he broke into an excited run.

When the boy entered the stable down the street, Sheridan turned toward the Longhorn Saloon. On the mounts at the rack he'd noted two strange brands and one Rocking Chair marking, and hoped that the man he wanted had not been the one who had ridden away. He pushed through the batwing doors, stood just inside them for a moment.

The owner, Sid Levers, stood as usual behind his bar, paying no attention to the two hard-looking riders who lounged near the back. Sheridan studied these two briefly. Durand had been hiring hands, and would likely choose such men.

Another man sat by himself at a poker table in the back of the room, half-empty bottle before him. His right eye was puffed and blackened, his mouth swollen as though he had been kicked squarely in the face by an iron-shod hoof. He wore a small patch over one ear, a spot that a bullet had grazed. He was humming, weaving in his chair, obviously drunk. Sheridan offered a silent prayer of thanks for his luck as his gaze swung back to the pair at the end of the bar.

"Now, Sheridan—" Levers came down the bar, whining complaint. He was a short, bald man with close-set eyes and a handlebar mustache that looked three sizes too large for his face. "I don't want no trouble in my place, understand?"

"No trouble, Sid."

Jim watched the two men straighten, eying him cautiously as they stepped apart. He spoke for their benefit deliberately.

"Boys, I don't know if you're working for the Rocking Chair, but I'm going to have a few words with my friend Evans, here. If you've got any objections, now's the time to speak up."

Neither moved, though a glance was exchanged between them.

"Mister, we just hit town," one of them said. "We heard a gent named Durand was paying top wages. We'd as lief sign on with you if you're hiring. Makes no difference to us."

The red light of caution signaled its warning in Sheridan's mind. There had been no mention that he was a rancher, or in any position to hire men. He nodded.

"Might make a deal later on."

He strode down the room then, stopping before the drunken man at the table. This was the puncher who had put Jim under the gun on the hotel stairs the week before. He had been beaten badly and had trouble focusing his eyes as he looked up from his seat.

"Come on, Bert," he said to Evans. "We're going for a little walk, you and me."

"Now, Sheridan, I'm warning you, you're causing trouble for nothing." Sid Levers could not resist complaint. "Durand ain't going to like it when he—"

"Durand fired him, didn't he, Levers?" Getting a grip on the drunken man's arm, Sheridan lifted Bert Evans to his feet. He started toward the door. "You keep your nose in your business, Sid, and you might prosper for years."

HE HAD almost reached the door and had begun to think that they were going to let him get away with it, after all—let him walk out with this man whose drunken bragging at the Rocking Chair had been overheard by Anne Taylor, words which had forever damned Mike Durand in Anne's eyes.

Just for that single moment Sheridan

thought they were going to let him walk out with the evidence that would hang Mike Durand and Tom McCulley for the murder of three men.

But it was not as easy as that. Sheridan saw the flicker of movement deep in the room reflected in the window beside the door. With a mighty shove he sent the drunken Bert Evans sprawling into the corner in front of the bar. He had his own weapon in hand as he threw himself back and aside, swinging to face the pair as he dropped.

The roar of one rider's weapon clapped thunder in the room. Sheridan fired as he hit the floor, fired again and again. The other man was still standing near the end of the bar and Sheridan fired a final time before he realized that the man was dead on his feet. The dead man's hand slid along the bar as he fell, turning his body so that the back of his head hit the brass footrail with a solid, bouncing thump.

Rising, Sheridan got a surprise. Sid Levers, shotgun in hand, had raised up behind the bar and was pointing the sawed-off weapon at Bert Evans's fallen form. Jim Sheridan shot the saloonman cleanly through the head, feeling sick as he pulled off the shot, but knowing he could not afford to miss. Levers's body jerked back and went down, the shotgun blasting a round, gaping hole in the ceiling.

With the letdown that came, Sheridan felt the first trembling in the backs of his knees. He realized that he was sweating, strode down the bar, and took a deep drink from the bottle that last had been used by the two men now dead at his feet.

He saw that Evans was coming around, mumbling incoherently as he pushed himself to a sitting position on the floor. Sheridan handed him the bottle and watched him greedily drink. But he was remembering Anne's eyes, wide with horror, when she had told him in her hotel room a few minutes before of confronting this puncher after she had overheard him boasting. She'd said, "He—he actually admitted he killed my father, Jim! And he swore Mike paid him five hundred dollars to do it! He admitted killing your rider, Johnny Watkins, and boasted that he was along when Tom McCulley killed his own partner, Mr. Alberson! He was drunk, but he swore every word was true! He laughed in my face, Jim! Actually laughed about killing Dad!"

Anne had told him, too, that Mike Durand had overheard the man's confession, had beaten Evans in a blind rage, and had locked Anne herself in her room. After a time he had ridden away and the old Negro, Duffy, had come to her aid.

Now, studying the battered, whisky-sodden form of Mike Durand's hired assassin, Jim Sheridan felt a final sense of relief. Here was the proof! This man's testimony would be the ultimate evidence, not only of murder, but of a planned, systematic series of raids upon Diamond stock by Durand and McCulley, who had passed the blame to Lou Bishop and the outlaw Jeffers.

With this knowledge the final bonds of restraint were freed from Sheridan's conscience. It was as though he had been fighting blindly until now, unable to see more than his adversary's shadow upon the indistinct screen of events.

He took the bottle from the drunken man and gripped him by the arm. He was attempting to lift Bert Evans from the floor, when he heard riders reining in at the rack outside.

"All right, Toomey." The lowered tones of Mike Durand's voice came through the swinging doors. "Take a couple of the boys around back. If he's in there I don't want any slip-ups this time!"

Jim Sheridan stiffened, hearing the squeaking of saddles as men dismounted. He hesitated only a second, glancing at the bar and at the half-conscious man at his feet. He bent quickly, grasping Evans by the hair, and driving a short, solid blow across the point of his jaw.

The man collapsed without sound. Sheridan picked him up, slid him across the bar and eased him down by the shoulders, dropping him finally upon the sprawled, dead body of Sid Levers behind the bar.

He stepped to the door, gun in hand, as the first booted footsteps sounded outside. He did not wait, but pushed through instantly, gun upraised.

CHAPTER XIV

An Owlhoot Passes

FOR that first fleeting second, Jim Sheridan felt the jar of surprise. He had expected Durand to be in the lead, but it was the round, burly Tom McCulley with whom he came face to face. Swiftly he brought his clubbed gun down across the man's head. McCulley sagged. Encircling his body with one arm, Jim brought his gun to bear upon Durand and the men immediately behind him.

"You're a dead man, Mike," he said, "if anybody moves a hair!"

The long, homely face of the Rocking Chair foreman was frozen in an expression of surprise. To Sheridan's chagrin, he counted at least a dozen men beyond Durand, several of them only getting out of saddle beyond the rail, and half-shielded by the crowded line of mounts.

At this instant he knew, too, the doubtful value of the human shield he held upright in his arm. He had expected, had hoped, to take Durand. Knowing the man now, and the actions of which that man was capable, he did not doubt but that Durand would unhesitatingly destroy Tom McCulley in order to get the man he was after. And McCulley's excessive weight was a handicap already exerting its pressure on Jim.

"You're through, Mike!" Sheridan shouted at him. "You made your last mistake when you let Evans go! He'll be half-way to the rim by now! When he hits Miles City there'll be a U.S. marshal on his way to the basin with your name tucked in his hat!"

Mike Durand's features gradually thawed. His glance circled sidewise, touching his men. When he looked at Sheridan again he smiled.

"I'd say you sounded like a ranny doing some whistling in the dark. You're a little mixed up on who's through around here, Sheridan."

Sheridan thought he heard the first faint beat of running hoofs. In the moment's silence that came the sound increased, and each man heard those hoofs racing in from the wide land beyond the town. Durand's smile disappeared. His eyes squinted.

"All right, boys," he said coldly. "We came to do a job! Let's get it done!"

Sheridan eared back the hammer of the heavy Colts .45 in his hand. The metallic clicking made a dull, ominous sound.

"You'll get it first, Mike. Right in the belly." Sheridan spoke softly now.

The mounting volume of hoofbeats drew closer to town. Sheridan's arm and shoulder began to ache beneath McCulley's weight. Deliberately he drew back a step toward the alley, then another. McCulley's feet dragged on the boards.

A man yelled from among the horses hitched at the rack. Another, between rail and walk, jerked to life, clawing for the gun on his thigh. The sudden pumping race of blood surged up in Jim. Mike Durand, as though molded of ice and steel, refused to make his move, keeping his gaze close against Sheridan and his hands well away from his gun.

Jim Sheridan could wait no longer. It was not in his nature to kill a man who refused to protect himself so, backing quickly, he snapped off his shot. The man between rack and walk yelled, spinning back against the rail and falling into the dust.

Durand moved then, as did all his men on walk and street. Darting aside, Durand's gun came up and out, exploding simultaneously with the weapon in Sheridan's hand. Jim felt McCulley's body jerk from the impact of the bullet squarely in his back. The man's breath whooshed out, and his body jerked again as another

man fired.

Durand lay prone on the walk, though Sheridan knew he had missed. The Rocking Chair foreman fired again, then a volley of shots poured into McCulley's body and around Jim Sheridan as, carrying the dead man as a shield, he struggled to reach the narrow alleyway between the saloon and the building next door. Slashing fire sliced into his ribs, bringing pain as from a branding iron.

HE DROPPED McCulley's bullet-riddled body, swinging at a headlong run down the dark passage between the two buildings. Cursing, he stumbled over a litter of trash and tin cans as the flaming blast of a sixgun exploded less than ten feet directly ahead. Toomey! And the others who had been sent to the rear of the building! Jim's stumble and loss of footing had been all that had saved his life.

He fired, still running, pumping another and another shot through the narrow slice of freeway ahead. He stepped on an empty bottle and went down, slamming full-on into an unseen body that went suddenly limp and fell beneath his weight. Only then, sprawled full length upon the man he had killed but not seen, did Sheridan become aware that the guns had been silenced, and of the swelling vibration of horses' hoofs in the town.

"Hi-eeeeyah!" Ozzie Gilman's shrill yell pierced the night, running a welcome chill along Jim's spine.

A gun slapped flatly then. Then another. An abrupt, bursting volley answered as the cavalcade of riders swept into the street between hotel and saloon.

Sheridan flipped open and unloaded the used shells from his gun. He had pushed home fresh shells when he heard a rustling step near the back of the alley. He fired from where he sat, seeing the instant vertical blast of another gun as it exploded into the ground. A man's body fell heavily, rattling cans and bottles, while another's footsteps went quickly away around the back of the building.

Sheridan picked his way to the back of the alley, but saw nothing behind store or saloon. He retraced his steps, avoiding the two fallen bodies, and came out on the walk up front.

The raw furrow of the wound across his chest had begun to throb. As he paused to thrust his handkerchief inside his shirt to staunch the flow of blood he saw Ozzie and Denver swing down, running low along the near side of the street. A gun flamed from the door of the Virginia Saloon, and both Ozzie's and Denver's answered. A tall man pushed through the swinging doors, stumbled drunkenly and fell headlong into the street between walk and rail.

A horse was down in the middle of the street before the hotel. Another man's body lay sprawled in the dust several yards beyond. Two more Diamond riders swung down as a further shot blasted from the dark alley beside the hotel. They fired in unison with Ozzie and Denver, and Ozzie waved them toward the alleyways at either side of the hotel.

Straightening, Ozzie yelled and signaled the rest of the Diamond crew on through town. Sheridan, glancing at the rack in front of the Longhorn, realized that Durand and some of his men must have reached their mounts and left town ahead of Ozzie's charge. He shook his head, suddenly aware of dizziness and fatigue.

He was supporting himself with one hand against the front wall of the Longhorn Saloon when Eve Hammond and Dane rode in.

"Jim! Jim Sheridan!"

There was hysteria in Eve's voice as she dropped from her mount and ran to Jim. Her face was white, her eyes darkly shadowed as she cried his name in both fear and relief. She threw her arms about him, holding him tight, her face pressed against his own.

"I told him! I told him you were not to be hurt, that I wouldn't stand for—"

Sheridan winced beneath the pressure of her grip. There was no feeling in him for this girl and it made no difference now that she had made a bargain with Mike

Durand. Such things were in the past. Durand's power in the Smoke River Basin, if not broken already, would be broken this night.

"You *are* hurt!" Eve stepped back, staring at the dark stain of blood in his shirt.

He shook his head. "No, Eve. Just grazed. You made your choice. Maybe you'd do better if you paid as much attention to Dane."

DANE CARTER had dismounted, and come up behind Eve. Meeting the man's glance, Sheridan saw the quick flush of color in Dane's face, saw his gaze falter and go away.

"I made my choice?" There was the familiar stirring of anger now in Eve. "You chose, not I! Don't you think I know—"

"No, Eve, you don't know. You never did know, but it doesn't matter now. People change. That's all there is to it."

Her eyes were glinting with anger, but before she spoke they heard the hoofbeats of more riders entering town. Sheridan saw Lou Bishop and, beside him, astride a deep-chested dun, Dirk Jeffers, searching the street with his gaze.

Sheridan walked out into the street, leaving the girl and Dane before the saloon. Lou Bishop dismounted, as did Jeffers. Bishop's smile came as he nodded at Jim. The rest of the Bar B riders remained in saddle.

"Looks like you had yourself a right nice little party, my friend." The rancher's glance touched the fallen bodies, the carcass of the dead horse in the street. "Heard a bunch of 'em hightailing as we came in, but figured you might need a hand here in town. You let Durand get away?"

Sheridan did not at once speak, as he met the cynical, twisted look on Dirk Jeffers's face. He nodded at the man, but spoke to the owner of the Bar B.

"Looks like you're still keeping bad company, Lou. How come?"

Bishop swung his glance lingeringly for a moment on Jeffers. Then he shrugged.

"Thought we might need every hand I could raise. Dirk happened to be at my place when I rode for the boys."

"I don't like it, Lou. I'd think you'd have more sense!"

The twisted grin had faded from Dirk Jeffers's swarthy features.

"By hell, I knew me and my boys shouldn't have come!" he swore. "Try doing a man a favor and all you get's a slap in the face!"

Sheridan's gaze centered upon Jeffers's narrow, hawklike face. When he spoke his voice held the threat of a deep anger.

"I want no favors from you and I'll take none, understand? As far as I'm concerned it's a pity Durand's boys didn't hang you from a limb a long time back! You're leaving town tonight, Jeffers! I don't want to see you again on the Smoke!"

For the space of one long breath Jeffers continued to meet Jim's gaze. His glance broke then, his expression sulky with the futile anger he felt. Deliberately Sheridan turned on his heel, hearing a shot beyond the hotel. Ozzie and the boys were still busy with the Rocking Chair.

"It's damned funny to me," Jeffers complained loudly, "that I get run out of town like a damned mangy coyote while another owlhoot settles down and rakes in the gravy!"

Sheridan stopped and turned back. He saw that Jeffers had seen Dane Carter on the walk before the Virginia Bar. In desperation, Dirk Jeffers was making a final cowardly attempt to drag Carter down with him. The outlaw was sick with jealousy of Dane and determined to pin some of his own guilt on Carter.

Jim Sheridan felt again that sense of futility he had known each time he had tried to help Dane. Everybody within hearing, except Eve, knew Carter for what he was. Yet the habit of protecting Dane for Eve's sake held firm in Sheridan for this one final time.

Looking directly at Jeffers, he said, "Get out! I'll give you until morning to be clear of the basin. If I ever catch you this side of the pass I'll kill you on sight.

That's a promise!"

He strode toward the hotel, hearing the fear and frustration and deep, resentful anger in Jeffers's whining voice.

"Carter's as guilty as me!" he screeched. "He spooked out as many head as me! What about it, Lou? Ain't you got no say-so around here no more? What the hell kind of deal you letting this slab-sided ranny hand me?"

SHERIDAN held to his course, hearing Lou's answer behind him.

"You heard the man, Dirk." Surprisingly, there seemed to be a sincere regret in Lou Bishop's voice. "You've played your hand. I reckon it's time to drift."

In spite of himself, Sheridan could not help but wonder for the hundredth time what Jeffers and Bishop could have in common. He had reached the rack before the Virginia Hotel when Eve Hammond screamed a warning.

"Jim! Jim, look out! He's—"

The rest of her words were blurred as he threw himself sidelong into the dust of the street. In the outthrown light of the hotel he had a fleeting glimpse of a dead man's upturned, staring face beneath the rack. As he hit the dirt the flaming blast of a sixgun roared, shattering the night with its sound.

The dust of the street was bitter, acrid, in Sheridan's nose and mouth. His wound throbbed, pulsing with pain as he pushed himself up, bringing his gun to bear.

In the center of the street, facing each other now, stood Lou Bishop and Dirk Jeffers, each with a gun in hand. With a jarring surprise, however, Sheridan saw that Bishop's weapon was centered upon Jeffers, that from its barrel still drifted a tendril of smoke while Jeffers's own weapon was pointed aimlessly at the ground.

Dirk Jeffers stared at Bishop. His mouth worked, but no words came. His voice, when finally it did come, was a harsh whisper that hardly reached to Jim.

"Not you! Not you, Lou! I never thought you'd—"

He staggered then. Jim saw the welling blood surge from his mouth and nose. Dirk Jeffers stiffened. The gun in his hand blasted flame into the dust at his feet. He fell like a pole-axed steer and lay without moving, without breath or life.

CHAPTER XV

Retribution

ON THE instant Jim Sheridan straightened and moved forward as Bishop stood looking down at the man he had killed. Jim knew that Jeffers would have shot him, Sheridan, in the back had it not been for this stocky rancher. He was surprised at the dead-white, shaken look Bishop gave him when finally the man glanced up.

There was no sign now of Lou Bishop's habitual smile. He shrugged, a gesture of infinite fatigue.

He said, "He wasn't worth much. Held it over my head that I got into a little trouble down Durango way a few years back. But we had some times in the old days, Dirk and me."

He looked suddenly at Sheridan as though recognizing him for the first time. Turning, he spoke over his shoulder.

"He was my brother, whatever that's worth to you."

He went straight to his horse and into saddle then. Without looking at any man he rode from town, the sound of his horse's hoofs beating an empty, hollow tattoo through the darkness of night. He would get back his Bar B, but it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

"Jim."

Sheridan turned, seeing Ozzie before the hotel. Moving toward the tophand, he saw the deep frown on his friend's face. Ozzie nodded at the hotel.

"We downed one of the hardcase hands Mike hired," he said. "But Durand's in-

side. I've got Denver and two of the boys watching the back. Durand called down. Said he's bringing Anne down and that the two of them are riding out."

Jim saw in the face of his friend a look of understanding he had not expected, a look that held full knowledge of what Anne Taylor meant to Jim. He looked up, staring at the hotel, as though he could pierce the worn boards of its façade and seek out the man he was going to kill. He went across the walk in quick, swinging strides, mounting the steps and entering the hotel, with Ozzie close behind him.

He stopped on the landing, staring at the girl at the head of the stairs. Anne's face was strained, tight-lipped, as she met his gaze. Standing squarely behind her, Mike Durand looked down at Sheridan on the landing.

"We're coming down and we're riding out of town alone!" Durand said, and his voice was a threat of death. "You may have won the last hand, Sheridan, but this is my trick! Call your boys off, or the girl goes out with me!"

Sheridan felt the cold touch of fear as he realized that a weapon was hard-pressed against the girl's back. He whispered her name.

"He will shoot, Jim." There was no fear in Anne Taylor's voice, but a certain knowledge that what she said was true. "He's mad, I think. Perhaps it's best I go."

"Move, mister!" Durand barked suddenly, enraged. "And no more palaver! Leave two mounts at the rack in front and there'd better be no one on the street when we come down! For her sake."

Sheridan backed down the stairs one by one. Staring at the face of the girl he loved, he ached to reassure her, to vow that no harm would come to her if it cost him his life. But the burning determination he saw in her foreman's eyes clamped his jaws shut, pushed him downstairs and across the lobby, out of her sight.

"Anything." Ozzie's voice was at his shoulder, understanding, at his command as he had always been. "Anything you want to do, Jim?"

Anything. But what? A chill as from jeering laughter racked Jim's mind. Footsteps crossed the walk, mounted the porch steps. Eve Hammond and Dane. Eve's voice was cool, without emotion.

"It's Anne, isn't it? Anne and Mike Durand there inside?"

Sheridan nodded. He said, "I'm warning you, girl, this is no time for any of your wild-brained ideas. He's got a gun in her back, and so help me if you—"

"Dane! Did you hear that?" She paid no further attention to Sheridan, but looked at Dane as though he were some kind of animal she particularly detested. The man flinched beneath her stare.

She said, "All right. You've wanted me all these years. You've wanted the Diamond and all the money you could spend. You've wanted it enough to steal as much of it as you could get your hands on. Now you can have it all, with me thrown into the bargain. Come on!"

SHE started inside. Sheridan instantly reached for her, but felt Ozzie's restraining pressure upon his arm.

"She'll be all right," came the tophand's whisper. "This is just what we need."

Jim stood aside, watching Dane enter the lobby behind Eve.

"Stay, there, woman!" Durand bellowed from the landing. "We're coming out of here and we don't want any interference!"

In Eve Hammond's voice was only contempt as she mounted the lower steps.

"I wouldn't *think* of interfering with your precious plans, Mr. Durand. Nor with those of your delicate mistress! But I wish to go to my room and I don't expect you to interfere with me!"

From the porch outside Sheridan could see only the lower stairs. He stood frozen to the spot, hardly noticing that Dane Carter had come to a stand in the middle of the lobby. He watched Eve imperiously mount from sight.

Durand cursed. Sheridan counted the beats of his heart, using all the restraint he could muster to keep himself from rushing inside.

"Why, you little witch!" Eve's voice came down from the stairs, filled with

anger. "Try to trip me, will you? Isn't it enough that you steal my man?"

There came the flat sound of a slap and the scuffling of feet on the landing. Then, suddenly, falling and sprawling in a tangle of skirt and riding clothes, arms and legs flying, Anne Taylor and Eve Hammond tumbled down the lower flight of stairs.

Eve's voice, strangled, but still imperious, called, "Now, Dane! Now!"

Leaping forward, Jim Sheridan saw Dane Carter go into his draw.

But gunfire blasted down from the landing above, taking Dane solidly and spinning him off-balance the instant his weapon fired. The next shot hit him.

Yet he still tried. In his own race for the foot of the stairs Sheridan felt a surging new sense of pride in this lost, weak man whose last ounce of strength was being called forth. Dane fired even as he staggered blindly forward, lifting his gun and firing shot after shot.

But now Jim centered his own attention on the stairs. His gun came up.

"All right, Mike!"

He fired in the same instant as Durand. The foreman's bullet whispered its song of death beside his ear. But Mike Durand, half-way between the landing and hall above, stiffened abruptly, his jaw gaping open with an expression of disbelief. The foreman of the Rocking Chair bent at the knees then and came down, his body crashing down the stairs and slamming into the wall at the landing turn. He lay still, eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

"Oh, Jim—Jim!" Anne threw herself into his arms. When finally he released her, he saw that Eve, disheveled and haggard, was kneeling beside Dane.

Crossing, Jim looked down. Dane's eyes were open and though his face was the color of a whitewashed fence he managed a smile. Blood spilled down his cheek from a gash near his temple, and he had taken a bullet hard in the hip.

"Looks like I let myself get a little rusty, eh, boy?" He winced as Eve dabbed at the wound on his brow. His smile faded and he said seriously, "Guess I let myself get a little rusty on a lot of things this past year, Jim. Man in my position can't guarantee much in the way of results, but I think I'll do a little practicing on the straight and narrow from here on."

TEMPERING her words with a smile, Eve said, "Oh, shush, you damned fool!" Looking at Ozzie, then, she said, "Well, Ozzie Gilman, don't stand there! Go get the doc! This man is liable to live!"

Pressing Jim's hand, Anne crossed quickly to Eve and kissed her. She said, "For a minute there on the stairs I thought I had a real fight on my hands. I couldn't imagine what had got into you all of a sudden."

"Well"—Eve smiled—"I don't know what I was thinking of, either. I guess I just didn't care. It's funny how you can get that way—not caring, I mean. Somehow"—she glanced at Dane—"it's entirely different now." She knelt once more beside Dane, then sat down on the floor, taking his head in her lap.

"You two had better get on out of here," she said. "I feel a good crying jag coming on. I can't stand having anyone around when I do that."

"No?" Dane grinned. "Well, it looks like you're going to have company, unless you expect me to walk out with this hole in my head."

"Oh, you. You don't count."

"No?"

"No." She bent and kissed him lightly upon the lips.

Anne and Jim turned toward the door. As they reached it Eve said, "I don't suppose you'll be interested in your old job, Jim, an old night rider like you?"

He grinned at her, not bothering to shake his head.

"You can make your cut on that Diamond stock any time," she said.

He nodded and turned outside with Anne. A warm breeze stirred, coming from the wide range beyond, the night rider's range, his range. He held his woman close in his arms there in the darkness of night and knew that no man needed any more than he had. • • •

Charlie chopped at him in savage fury

THE CHUCKLINER

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

YOUNG CHARLIE CHICKAREE rode the calico cayuse fast over the gaunt Montana landscape. His green-flecked eyes were still sullen with the anger he'd felt that morning at the Double Diamond.

The punchers had cursed in amazement when they discovered that the chuckliner was gone—with Pow-a-Sheik, the Arabian sire. They all had derided Charlie for insisting the chuckliner was a horse thief. Now they couldn't meet his eyes.

That hadn't cured Charlie's resentment, though. He'd decided to show them all up

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In the middle of a howling Montana blizzard, Bantan finally squared himself with the world

by going hell-for-leather after the horse-stealing chuckliner. His mittened hand touched at the smooth stock of his Winchester. Maybe he'd finish the job before the blizzard set in. He rode fast, the stiff felt brim of his gray Stetson thonged warmly down over his ears.

Charlie Chickaree was of the South, having come on a trail drive from Mexican border country only eight months ago, and so he thought in terms of leagues. Eight of them, maybe twenty-five miles, lay behind him. That was all right, as long as he got the chuckliner in his sights.

As he single-footed the calico around a rearing rock formation, his lips slitted in contempt of ranch-owner Jim Breen and the other punchers. They'd outrightly declared they weren't heading into the waiting teeth of a Montana blizzard, Pow-a-Sheik or no Pow-a-Sheik.

"Take the advice of an old'n who knows this range," Breen had quietly told Charlie. "Guess I deserved to lose the stud if an old hand like me didn't see right off the horse-thievin' breed Bantan belonged to. Now mind me, Charlie! Don't learn the hard way and have us dig you out of a snowbank come spring."

But Pow-a-Sheik was Charlie's pride and joy, his responsibility. He didn't intend to be scared off by a Montana blow. So he rode off across the great cold landscape of the cattle range in winter, under forbidding, sunless gray, toward the pallid blue lumps of the hills.

NOWHERE was a clear ray of light to relieve the monotony. And now he uncertainly stared up past the shadowing brim of his hat at a worried sky over which snapped little spits of white. In his bones he felt the brooding torment that lay over the range, a gathering of forces, as of a mad thing about to spring to a height unguessed. And the cold, gray distances moaned.

He shivered in his enclosing sheepskin, reined the calico on a rise of ground covered with browned grama grass. Staring fixedly ahead at that blue-nosed plain, he felt a shattering fear—the fear of being alone with a thing whose strength he may have underestimated.

His resentments again lashed him on. The punchers had thought him a know-nothing younker who had a lot to learn about Montana hospitality. Even a chuckliner, one of that free-and-easy breed who lived by throwing themselves upon the hospitality of the country, deserved shelter for as long as he cared to stay.

Charlie, though, had spotted the chuckliner for a horse-thief right away. He pointed out that Bantan's string of two pintos bore the Bentknife brand—an unvented brand at that.

Bantan was a red-haired hombre, with a greasy, red-bearded face, and eyes that were shrewd and watchful if you looked behind the dancing blueness of them. He was tall and slim and strongly lithe, but the plentiful gray in his hair hinted he was old enough for a passel of grandsons. Instead of answering Charlie's accusation, he pulled out a mouth harp and his long legs twisted and twined in a fast-stepping clog-dance. The punchers grinned.

"Gentlemen," Bantan proclaimed finally, "you won't lose nothin' by puttin' me up, as you can see. As for this younker and his insults—" a whine crawled in his pouchy, reddened neck, "—I want you to know I been workin' for the Bentknife spread. I got paid off in horses, seein' as I'm a gamblin' fool and can't trust myself with money. I didn't vent the brands because I come away too much in a hurry, and besides." he concluded virtuously, "I love horse-flesh too much to mar it."

The punchers were powerfully entertained in the next few evenings, no doubt of that. The chuckliner was the cutting-est-up granddad they ever did see. "Bring on some eggs," he'd cry, and his feet were a marvel the way they clapped around the bunkhouse floor, touching not an egg. But once, flushed with his popularity, he stopped his feet long enough to glare off into the shadows where Charlie lay on his bunk.

"Say," he said, whining, "that boy's making me powerful unhappy. Had a son, once, use to look at me like that—mean and haughty-like."

He looked around the circle of dim light.

"Me and my boy didn't get along so good. Didn't like my fiddling feet. Not that I didn't bring him some cash now and then." He nodded his head. "Guess he still thought I shoulda stayed around to help him with the homesteadin'. And then there was them gun wolves tryin' to run him off our land."

A gulp traveled down his throat. His eyes gleamed triumphantly. "I didn't let my boy down, though, if you want the truth. Yessir, him and me shot it out together with them range rats. Then my boy got it. He—died saying as how they didn't come any finer than his old man."

Charlie had hooted his disbelief outright. The chuckliner hung his head. Three mornings later the cowboys discovered Charlie had called the turn. Bantan, his piebalds and Pow-a-Sheik were gone; the echo of Bantan's clapping feet alone remained.

NOW came the first fugitive hissings of the blizzard. Instantly the cold deepened to a startling, penetrating thing. Cursing, Charlie saw the world turn to a frightening blue-black that lighted queerly.

And then he saw Bantan!

He forgot the encroaching blizzard in the thrill of discovery. Bantan was a moving dot, he and his string, as he labored along the rim of a frozen gully. Charlie kneed the calico. The horse sprang down the rise; frozen sod flying.

There was hardly a sky now. There was hardly a direction but that of blasting wind.

Charlie brought his Winchester up, pumping shots. He was not in range, and would not have taken a chance of hitting the silver stallion if he had been. He was trying to bluff Bantan, half knowing it wouldn't work. But when Bantan heard the down-wind shots, he did a surprising thing. He brought his string around and roweled his mount toward Charlie. Charlie's rage splintered inside of him. Bantan was riding Pow-a-Sheik.

Fearing a trick, Charlie savagely got Bantan in his sights, but Bantan's hands were high up and he was yelling something. Then, very suddenly, he disappeared—and at last Charlie knew what Bantan had been trying to tell him. Between Charlie and Bantan a wall of white swept in, danced in atomized fury. The wind shrieked, clutched. Like millions of whirring knives, the snow smothered against Charlie's face. The blizzard had broken.

Now Bantan blundered out of the fine powder. Pow-a-Sheik's great, wild-eyed head jarred against Charlie's knee. Bantan's mittened hands clawed at Charlie. While the horses frantically jockeyed, Charlie tried to beat off those grasping hands. Bantan's snow-encrusted beard was within an inch of Charlie's set face. Behind that mask his eyes were terrified holes.

Cursing, Charlie peeled his glove to grab his .44. It was like sticking his hand into fire. He put the glove on again, a tight fear seizing him. This meant a raw death—unless he found shelter.

Now he could understand Bantan's desperate screams.

"We got to hole up! You got to find us a place—an old man like me. You're a smart younker. You know this country."

Their horses milled in smothering snow.

Charlie's rime-encrusted eyes stared incredulously.

Bantan screamed again, "We got to find shelter before the real storm hits us!"

The terror in his voice cut above the wind's honing, ripped to Charlie's nerves. He thrust Bantan away, half rose in the saddle to stare unbelievingly over range that until seconds ago was visible for miles. Only its outline remained. Rises and draws that Charlie knew well were beginning to fill in.

BANTAN reared Pow-a-Sheik in close again. The horse's nostrils were wide with his fear. Snow was lodged in the crevices of his ears and terror rolled his eyes. For a moment Charlie's throat lumped in pain for this creature caught in the terrible freezing blight. But he and Bantan were things of blood and warmth, too.

"All right, tie in!"

Face sagging with pitiful relief, Bantan threw a hitch around Charlie's saddle-horn. Charlie forced the head of his flinching cayuse into the devil's wind.

In ten minutes, his eyes were all but frozen open. Ice ridged his lips. He hunched farther into the sheepskin, and searched for familiar landmarks. Another dike of the storm broke. Nature blasted the earth with inconceivable violence.

Nearby sounded the low, miserable groaning of cattle, the pitiful bleats of calves nuzzling for warmth. Through whipping breaks in the storm, Charlie saw the shuffling beasts. They were the remnants of a great herd whose frozen carcasses would be found in the spring. Their moanings dwindled away behind.

The calico was shuddering violently, eyes iced shut, but Charlie forced it up a steepening slope. Then he saw what he was looking for, an outthrust of granite that rose like a great ship from the sea of blasting snow. Sick relief lodged icily in his stomach.

He didn't much care what was happening to Bantan, but when the calico pitched to his knees, Bantan came fighting out of the hazy whip of snow, leading Pow-a-Sheik. He pulled Charlie from the dying horse. His scream came. "Got to make it afoot!"

Staggering, slipping, numbly cursing, Charlie fought up a slope of gravel. Like a benediction, a rocky roof hovered over him. Animal-like, he crawled into the overhang and collapsed just beyond the reaching fingers of snow.

The fire felt good on his face. The smell of charring beef was an aroma from paradise. He awoke, dreamily content and warm. Then he saw Bantan, sitting cross-legged near the fire, over which a flank of beef was skewered.

Bantan's monkey-face wrinkled in a dubious grin.

"Half dozen cattle shored up at the foot of the slope, young'n," he explained. "I carved off a couple sides of beef before they froze solid. Stack of wood somebody left here before us."

He dislodged a shower of sparks from the fire. His beard was dark red with greasy sweat. "We're sittin' pretty," he grinned. "Got enough wood for a day and a half, mebee, and we got a horse. Minute the storm lets up we start for the Double Diamond." He indicated Pow-a-Sheik, forelegs braced apart, head drooping, and well within the overhang.

He regarded Charlie worriedly. "Hadn't been for me, you'd be froze at the foot of the slope like them cattle. Mebbe you can put in a good word for me with Breen."

DIZZYING spots of blackness rose in Charlie's eyes as he came to one elbow. "Where's your pintos, Bantan?"

Bantan flinched, made a helpless gesture at the solid whirling wall of white beyond the overhang.

"You cut them loose?" Charlie was on his knees, incredulous. "You greasy horse-stealer, what do you mean, we're sittin' pretty? Even if the blizzard lets up, can't two of us ride Pow-a-Sheik back and you know it, Bantan."

"It's a chance, son! It's the only chance we got!"

Charlie cursed him rawly, savagely. "Bantan, you're a thievin', rotten varmint of a man. You sunk down so low you walked out on your own half-grown son."

Bantan's red-rimmed eyes turned half-wild in the firelight. "Don't say that, boy," he gasped.

Charlie's derisive laugh bounced from the walls of the overhang. "You ran for it when you saw them range-wolves closing in. Ran for it like a red coyote and left your son to take his medicine alone."

Bantan was up on his knees, tearing gasps coming from his throat. "You don't know what you're sayin', boy!"

His mouth twisted with hurt as Charlie went on with savage enjoyment. Tears furrowed his dirty face. Finally he uttered an angry cry and threw wood forcefully into the fire.

"Dont say no more!" he cried. "I ain't gonna stand for no more. You hurt me, boy, you hurt me bad. I'm not a bad'n. You got to believe that. I got to live free and easy. And I got a powerful love of beautiful horses."

He faltered. "Don't know why it is.

Just can't let horses alone!"

Suddenly he hunched down, staring into the fire. "I always liked the beautiful things of life—dancin', music, joshin' with people. My boy just couldn't get it through his thick head. Then that time I come back, they was fixin' to run us off the land—"

His head slowly sank, as if it was an intolerable memory.

"Can't stand guns, figtin'. It's like you say, boy. I ran off, left my boy alone. They killed him."

The blizzard's howl rose. Charlie sat silent, bitterly, achingly silent, his head turned away from that picture of a man bereft. The silence endured. Then, eerily, Bantan began playing his mouth organ, a sad piece that wavered within the overhang. Charlie stood it as long as he could, then raised his head sharply. Bantan took the signal and put the mouth harp away. But a strange quietude smoothed his face.

"Son," he said gently, "mebbe we're spendin' our last hours together, and there ain't no use scrappin'. On the other hand, there's a fightin' chance if we stick together. Likely Pow-a-Sheik ain't got much horse-spirit left, but might be we can fix him up proper to cross the snow."

Charlie tossed his head in restless denial. "Forget it, Bantan," he said wearily. "Pow-a-Sheik would go crazy fightin' two riders. Besides, he's done in."

"We'll build him up." Bantan's eyes glistened as he came hunching around the fire. Anxiety tensed his lips. "Then, if the blizzard lets up, you ride Pow-a-Sheik back alone!"

Charlie sat cross-legged, green-flecked eyes narrowed. He felt as if he'd been walloped. He said harshly, "You're not spiffin' me?"

When Bantan nodded eagerly, Charlie snapped, "You're lyin'! You'd be left here alone. Nobody'd take a chance on comin' after you—not for a horse-thief—not when the blizzard might break again."

Bantan hung his head. "I've thought of that, boy. Like I tell you, you remind me of my son. Yessir. I guess a boy's pa has a right to sacrifice for him once in a while, don't he? Now don't let's talk about it anymore. It's settled. Now here's my idea."

THE interminable hours were ticked away by renewed bursts of fury from the blizzard. Charlie applied himself to feeding the silver Arabian sire by scrabbling for grama grass under the snow near the overhang. When he was numb with cold, he warmed himself by rubbing Pow-a-Sheik down with mittened hands.

With sections of cowhide taken from the sides of beef cut from the frozen cattle, Bantan was busy making protective boots for Pow-a-Sheik. He cut squares of cowhide large enough to cover the forelegs to the hocks, to be laced above the points of the hocks so they wouldn't slip off.

He stood back, finally, admiring his handiwork. He winked jovially. "Got a hunch Lady Luck is smilin' on us, son!"

Charlie held grama grass to Pow-a-Sheik's nibbling, rubbery lips. Under the brim of his hat his face was gaunt and grim. He didn't face Bantan, but said harshly, "Bantan, if the blizzard lets up, I couldn't be rotten enough to leave a man here to freeze, even a horse-thief."

Bantan was silent. Charlie said, "We'll try to make it. But that's the way it's gotta be."

Bantan hunkered down slowly, his face a haggard study in flickering, scarlet shadows as he stared into the fire. After awhile, whispering, his voice came.

"I reckon I'll make some music, son, your permission. . . ."

Charlie forced the doleful pieces out of his mind. He closed his burning eyes. Anybody knew you couldn't load a horse down with two riders for a twenty-thirty mile trek across the snow. Pow-a-Sheik would bust plumb in two.

But that's the way it had to be.

Charlie slid to a full-length position near the fire. He didn't realize how lulling, how soothing, the artistry of Bantan's music became.

Hours later, it wasn't the abrupt halt of wind and snow that snapped open Charlie's eyes. The sight of Bantan stepping over him made the passing of the

blizzard relatively unimportant. Charlie still felt the lingering sensation in his ankle where Bantan had stumbled against him.

Poised rigidly, Bantan's lips were a tight curve of anxiety. His white breath had stopped. His eyes were riveted on the supine figure of Charlie Chickaree. This Charlie saw out of one slitted eye. A rhythmic thumping started in his chest as he matched Bantan's rigid pose. Then came an agonized ache in his throat. Bantan was double-crossing him, after all that palaver about his son. Now he was fixing to head for Esmer, the town on the other side of the pass.

Bantan's breath now came softly from his open mouth. The anxious lines around his glimmering eyes smoothed. He completed his interrupted step over Charlie and swiftly went toward Pow-a-Sheik. A slow burning of rage started in Charlie as he saw that the horse was already saddled.

Hurriedly taking the reins, Bantan urged the horse toward the lip of the overhang. When the animal's booted legs first stepped into the edge of crusted snow, Charlie came up behind Bantan, clenched his two fists together to make one great fist, and smashed the chuckliner along the side of the head.

Bantan staggered, crying out, whirling away from the force of the blow. Charlie pressed in on him again, savagely chopping at his face and his upper body.

Bantan fell against the wall where the granite, overhanging ceiling sloped down. His face turned wild. He came back at Charlie, arms swinging. Charlie took one hard blow. Then he caught the chuckliner flush on the jaw. Bantan went straight back, folded up, legs spread-eagled. His head was canted sideways in the rigid pose of unconsciousness. And Charlie led Pow-a-Sheik into the silent world of snow. In him was a sense of the fitness of things.

HALFWAY to the ranch, the fever came on Charlie. He muttered, tottered drunkenly in the saddle, sang snatches of song. But the horror of what he had done choked his song in his throat. In his fever, he understood what he had been unable to understand before.

"Gotta go back," he muttered.

Pow-a-Sheik sensed Charlie's condition. He also sensed that the blizzard had only paused to catch its breath. He paid no attention to the weak flapping of reins, but lifted his strangely shod feet in patient gait across Montana's rind of snow.

A mile from the ranch, the blizzard closed in with a destroying roar. But at the Double Diamond, Breen had the punchers watching for some sign of Charlie. Charlie awoke in a ranch house bed, Breen and several of the hands standing awkwardly around.

Charlie told his story in delirious bursts. "Left him behind," he muttered. "Left him behind to freeze like them cattle. And I hadn't oughta done it! Ought to have tried to get back across the snow with him."

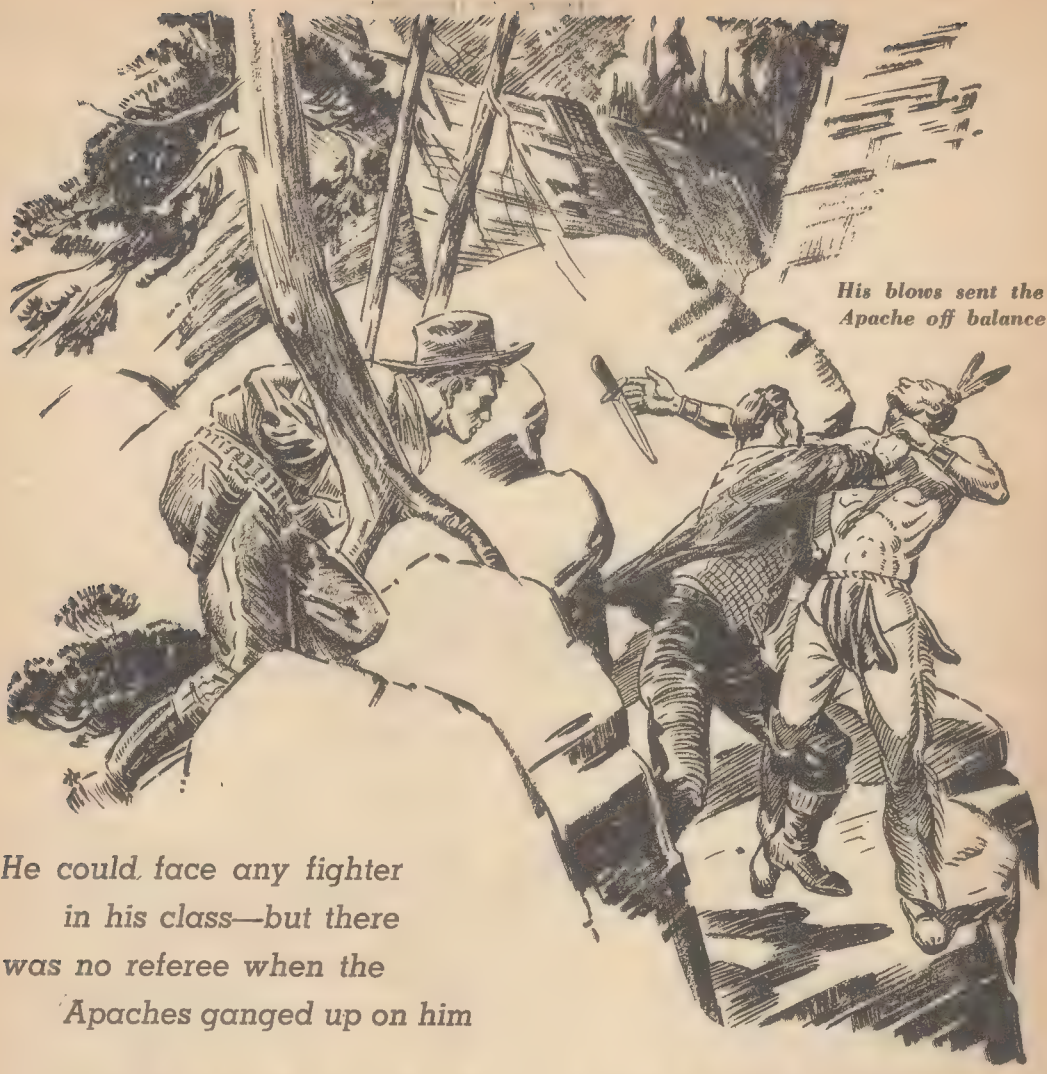
"The coyote deserved what he got," asserted Breen's segundo. "Besides, Pow-a-Sheik was near done in as it was. The two of you would never have made it, Charlie."

"It's true," nodded Breen. "The horse-stealer softened you up with talk about his son, meantime makin' big plans to hit on out alone. Figured he could make it to Esmer. Chances are he could have if you'd been fooled."

"But if he hadn't stumbled over me," groaned Charlie. "That's what breaks me up inside. Him bein' a dancin' man, he wouldn't stumble—not unless he wanted to. Didn't have any trouble dancin' fast around a dozen eggs without touchin' a one—"

Shattering the room's silence, the blizzard screamed as if in helpless terror of its own destroying powers. The punchers were voiceless, a wonder on their gaunt faces. Then Jim Breen lifted his graying head.

"No call to blame yourself for what happened, Charlie," he said. "Dyin' out there is Bantan's way of squarin' himself with the world. And you've picked up a few more of the teachin's that go into the makin' of a man." • • •



His blows sent the Apache off balance

He could face any fighter in his class—but there was no referee when the Apaches ganged up on him

CHICAGO JOHNNY

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

CHICAGO JOHNNY opened his eyes and yawned. It was dawn. The stagecoach rolled along the bottom of a wild canyon. The other passenger, a short paunchy man, was asleep, lulled to rest by the easy swaying of the coach and the greasy chuckle of the hubs. Johnny spat out the window.

Arizona was one hell of a place. He plucked a celluloid toothpick from a frayed lapel and explored his teeth. He hadn't eaten for twelve hours, but gnawing on a toothpick had always given him a feeling of importance—just as though he did have the money to pay for a good meal. He still didn't know how far it was to

Tombstone. He had asked the driver at the last swing station but that lordly individual had looked right through him and walked away.

Johnny looked down at his clothes. His varnished shoes were badly cracked, his trousers bagged. His checkered vest was in fair shape, but his coat was shot. He reached up and tapped his derby more firmly on his head. A thin veil of dust floated down from it. The West was hell on a guy's clothes.

The coach climbed a rise. The driver's whip cracked and it seemed louder than usual. The coach picked up speed. The driver shouted. The whip cracked again. Johnny sat up straight. That was no whipcrack. He leaned out the window. A figure stood by the roadside, a figure wearing a red headband, dirty calico shirt, a buckskin kilt above high, wrinkled moccasins. A rifle was pointed at Johnny.

"Indians!"

Johnny's derby banged against the window top. Something split a panel beside his head. The coach slewed around a curve and went over in a splintering crash. Johnny reached for the window over his head. He scrabbled wildly for a hold and heard the other passenger cry out as Johnny's feet hit him. Johnny gripped the window rim and heaved himself up and out.

He hit the ground and went to his knees. Guns rattled above the screaming of the horses. He dived into a clump of brush, cursed as sharp needles ripped into him. Clamping his derby on tightly with both hands, he floundered through the brush. There was a wide gap in the canyon wall. He clambered up a rock-littered slope until he was high above the road, then dropped, exhausted. Orange flashes sparkled through a pall of dust. The driver—was firing from behind a fallen horse. The other passenger was screaming like a woman.

Apaches swarmed over the two men in the road. Johnny turned away. His mouth soured, and he retched violently. He buried his head in his arms, as if trying to shut out the scene.

AFTER a long time he raised his head. The odor of wood smoke and the crackle of flames came to him. There was another smell. It drove him to his feet. He staggered up the cleft until it turned sharply and hid the horror below from his sight. He had once sickened at a similar odor in the Patch in Chicago. A tenement had burned to the ground. Some of the tenants had been trapped inside.

Johnny drove himself on through a maze of cactus and rock. Sickening heat settled on the land. His shoes ripped to rags. He carried his coat and unbuttoned his vest. He had almost thrown the vest away but at the last moment he relented. It had cost him ten bucks.

Thirst dried his throat. The sunlight reflected from the ground up into his eyes. He went on and on until he could stand it no longer. He crawled into the hot shade of a ledge of granite, and he rested his head on his knees.

Jumbled thoughts raced through his mind, and none of them cheered him. The bad luck kid—that was him. He had been a comer in the squared circle until the unlucky night he had smashed Danny Counihan to the canvas in the fourth round. Danny had died that night. Boxing had been tolerated by the broad-minded Chicago police but Danny was a nephew of an alderman. Johnny left Chi on a fast freight that same night. Denver had been O.K., until the law boys heard from the Chicago police. Johnny had reached New Mexico one jump ahead of them. Men did not pay to look at fights in New Mexico. They provided their own amusement with pistol, knife or boot. Some miners in a bar at Lordsburg had started Johnny farther west.

"Take the Tombstone stage, *amigo*. You might get a fight in the Birdcage. But watch out for Apaches, kid. They don't figure on fightin' a man with their fists. Wait until you hear a three-foot arrow lookin' for your guts. Wait until you see them devils with the manes of hair and the sharp knives. Maybe you better get back east after all."

The answer had been simple enough.

He couldn't go back East. There was no money to be made in Lordsburg. He knew only one trade. Men might pay to see a real Chicago welter fight in Tombstone. Maybe he could even go on to the Coast. Johnny got on the Tombstone stage with a packet of greasy free-lunch sandwiches and high hopes.

Shadows slid down the slopes and filled the canyon with darkness. Johnny shivered. He turned up the frayed velvet collar of his coat and picked his way between the rocks until the moon rose. He had no idea in which direction he was going. He hoped he wasn't heading back to the clotted horror on the stage road.

He was plodding up a wide gully when he caught the odor of woodsmoke. He sank to the ground. He had grown to hate that smell. A pebble bounced down a slope and clicked against the boulder he lay behind. His throat dried. Icy sweat trickled down his sides. Feet crushed against gravel on the far side of his boulder. The strength drained from his legs. He could not run if he wanted to.

A leg hung over the edge of the boulder. It was booted, and a spur glinted dully in the faint light.

"By the sandals of Saint Patrick," a voice said, "to send a man out on guard in this place of death is sheer homicide."

Johnny tried to speak, but his voice died in his throat. He opened his mouth wide. "For God's sake, don't shoot! It's a white man! Don't shoot!"

THE LEG hit the ground. In one flowing movement a carbine covered Johnny as the hammer clicked back sharply.

"Come out of there!"

Johnny scrambled to his feet and held his arms high. The Irishman circled behind him. A hand slapped both hips and then felt beneath his coat. The soldier came in front of Johnny.

"What are ye doin' out here, little man, where only death is at home?"

He gripped Johnny's shoulder and pushed him up the gully. A voice challenged from the darkness, followed by the sharp click-click of a cocking hammer.

" 'Tis all right, Birdeck. I've got a prize for the lootenant."

"What is it, Mehaffey? An Apache squaw?"

"Blest if I know what it is. It looks like a coyote who wore out his only pelt and could not get another from the Q.M."

They passed Birdeck's shadowy form and turned into a narrow canyon. A fire glowed against the walls. Moving figures cast gigantic menacing shadows. Johnny almost fainted as his nose picked up the blessed odor of strong hot coffee. A big man rose from inspecting a bandage on the arm of a trooper. Mehaffey pushed Johnny forward.

"A prize for ye, Mr. Wheat."

The officer kicked the fire into a brighter blaze. "What are you?" His voice was thin with weariness.

"Johnny Flanagan. I was on the Tombstone stage. The Apaches jumped it, and I got away. I been wanderin' in these mountains since dawn."

The officer nodded. "We passed there at noon." He passed a dirty hand across his face and looked queerly at Johnny.

A soldier came into the firelight. Three chevrons were on the arm of his faded shirt. Hard gray eyes bored into Johnny's. "He could be one of them swine who has been selling likker to the Apaches, Mr. Wheat."

"No man in his right mind would travel Arizona in that rigout, Dolan."

A ring of troopers surrounded them. They didn't look friendly. Johnny wasn't scared of any white man alive, least of all a pack of dirty soldiers.

"I ain't no whisky runner. I just run out of the hard stuff in Lordsburg. I had just enough left for a ticket to Tombstone. I figgered I might get a chance to fight there."

"Fight?"

Johnny balled his fists and squared off. "You know—in the old squared circle." He tried to carry it off with a laugh.

"For the love of Heaven," said Mehaffey.

The officer tried not to smile. "You'd

best come with us until the Apaches are settled again. You'll be safe enough at Fort Bryan until there is a chance to get on to Tombstone."

It was a slow ride to Fort Bryan the next day. Three troopers wore bandages and four others trudged along on foot, eyeing Johnny with all the bitterness of the dismounted trooper as they saw him perched on a pack mule. The patrol had been chasing Apaches for eleven days and had come out on the short end of the score.

FORT BRYAN was a dilapidated cluster of adobes and jacales scattered along the edge of a mesa. Faded and patched bell tents flapped restlessly in a dry, hot wind that constantly sent sand devils racing crazily across the sunbaked parade ground.

Johnny's heart sank. There was no town, no roads other than the rutted tracks that led up from a canyon hazy with heat. Mehaffey had told him that Fort Bryan had been reoccupied after many years of abandonment because of recent Apache troubles. Lieutenant Wheat and his twenty troopers were the garrison. The nearest permanent fort was fifty miles away.

In one of the ramshackle adobes was a saloon run by phlegmatic Abe Merkel. He had taken over the fort when it had been abandoned, serving rotgut to miners, cowpokes and soldiers. He had stayed on when the trouble started, since there was no way to get his stock safely transported. Lieutenant Wheat talked him into giving Johnny a job as swamper. There was no pay but it was a place to sleep and eat.

The days dragged by and gradually Merkel's place became a hell for Johnny. The troopers were lonely. Long ago their hazing of each other, festered by the heat and loneliness, had exploded into savage fights. Those who did not get along went about in a sort of armed neutrality. But with Johnny it was different; he was fair game for all of them. He dared not leave the post. He was a civilian. He was deathly afraid of Apaches. They all rode him, but the worst two were Birdeck and Sergeant Dolan.

"Flanagan did ye say your name was?" asked Dolan one evening with drunken politeness. "Sure, ye must have taken an Irish name to give ye the guts ye lack. And you a box fighter, too."

Birdeck laughed from a corner table. "The yellow slob could take any name he wanted to, Sarge, and it wouldn't make no difference."

Johnny served drinks to a pair of troopers. Birdeck got up and walked to the end of the bar. His tablemate waved to Johnny.

"Hey, Flanagan. Get over here and wipe up this mess."

Merkel tossed the bar rag to Johnny. His eyes held Johnny's briefly. Johnny walked past Birdeck. He expected to be tripped but the shove that went with it was a surprise. He staggered across the floor and brought up hard against the wall. Dolan laughed. Johnny untied his apron. To hell with it. He had taken enough. But as he walked slowly toward Birdeck he couldn't help but think of that night in Chicago—

The trooper wiped his mouth and hitched up his belt. He wasn't much heavier than Johnny but was at least six inches taller. He grinned at his tablemate.

Birdeck stood flat-footed and swung. Johnny swayed sideways and then back to avoid the following punch. Birdeck grunted with the force of his blows. Johnny drove a short left into the trooper's gut. His right skidded off Birdeck's jaw. Birdeck bobbed about clumsily.

There was no sound except the scrape of their feet on the sanded floor and the hiss of their breathing. Birdeck forced Johnny back time and time again with looping blows.

"Hit him, Birdeck," someone jeered. "What's holding you back?"

Birdeck spat. Johnny connected with a right cross.

"Hey, Birdeck! Hit him—if you can!"

If Johnny beat him, and he was sure he could, it would bring no relief from his tormentors. Birdeck was a scrapper. The rest of the battlers on the post would be

sent against Johnny one by one to show who was top cock at Fort Bryan.

Birdeck was wide open. Johnny pulled a punch. Birdeck grinned. Johnny dropped his guard. A left smashed against his mouth. A right caught him beneath the eye. He staggered and shook his head. Birdeck brought one up from the floor.

JOHNNY came to in the back room of the saloon. Merkel was wiping his face with a wet rag. "Why'd you let him beat you, kid?"

Johnny gingerly felt his jaw. "I could of beat him. Abe, but I figgered I'd let him beat me. Maybe they'll get tired of riding me after a while. I've been taking it from them because I ain't got no other place to go, Merk."

Merkel rubbed his bald head. "It won't work. You start running now and you'll never stop. Face up to them, beating or no. They ain't Apaches. You won't be scalped."

Johnny shook his head.

Merkel said, "Look, kid. I started running away from myself twenty years ago. I'll be buried out here under a name that isn't mine. Don't let these guys make a jellyfish out of you. You got guts. These troopers aren't a bad bunch. Fight back. They'll respect you in time. But as long as you're a rabbit they'll make life hell for you."

After Merkel left Johnny sat for a long time staring at the floor. His face ached. He was used to that, but he'd never get used to the festering hurt to his pride. Merkel meant well. The soldiers didn't bother him. Lord knows he gave them enough jawbone until their rare pay days came through. He had a hold on them. Johnny got up and went to the window.

The moon lit the desert. It was as quiet as a sleepy tiger Johnny had once seen at a circus. It had been quiet enough until someone had poked a hand in between the bars to rouse it. Johnny winced as he remembered the bloody mess that was left of the hand when it was dragged back through the bars.

Three times Johnny had got as far as the bottom of the mesa trying to get up enough guts to reach civilization. Three times he had come back up the rutted tracks with fear riding his back like a horrible grinning monkey. It was no use trying it again.

He lay down on his bunk and closed his eyes. He prayed for the first time in many years. . . .

"Get up, kid," a voice said.

A hand shook him awake. He looked up at Merkel. The gray light of the false dawn was outling the window.

"A courier came in half an hour ago. Lieutenant Wheat has been ordered to abandon Bryan and report at Fort Bowie. They think Loco is headin' this way to try for the guns and horses. We'll have to go with the troopers, kid."

Johnny dressed with shaking hands. Glass smashed and pungent liquor odors came to him as Abe cleaned off the saloon shelves. A sober Apache was bad enough; a drunken one came straight from hell.

Johnny raced after Abe. He didn't want to be alone. The troopers were lining up before their quarters with saddled horses.

Sergeant Dolan issued a carbine and ammunition to Abe and Johnny. "Show him how to use it, Abe. See that ye do not shoot one of us in the back by mistake, Flanagan."

Lieutenant Wheat came from the headquarters building. "Loco is loose with a band of bronco Chiricahuas and Tontos. He is estimated to have between fifty and one hundred warriors. He is somewhere between us and Bowie and wants our guns and horses to make a break for Mexico. We can't move fast because of our wounded men. If he catches up with us we must see that he gets no horses. That's all."

THE FIRST HOURS were not too bad but when the heat came up Johnny was in agony. The saddle rubbed his legs raw. His butt ached, and his neck was stiff from his constant turning to look behind him. They rode through a great cup of hills with a cloud of dust hanging over them.

At noon Lieutenant Wheat left the road

and led them through a twisting defile that rose higher and higher until at last it came out on the side of a sheer cliff. Stretching westward to the purple haze of mountains was a hard yellow desert. Johnny rode with his face turned to the wall. He did not dare look down.

Halfway along the trail a shot cracked flatly near the head of the column.

"For the love of God," said Merkel, "they've gotten ahead of us."

The column turned into a rock-littered shelf that cut deep into the cliff face. They herded the horses under the protection of the cliff and then dropped behind rocks. Johnny crouched between Merkel and the stolid Mehaffey. Now and then a shot boomed flatly along the cliff and lead spattered the troopers.

"What now, Mehaffey?" asked Merkel. His face was purple in the heat.

The Irishman shrugged. "We can't go ahead nor can we turn back now without fear of bein' ambushed. We must sweat it out here until Mister Wheat decides what to do. That's the sin of bein' an officer. Ye must do the thinkin' for everyone."

By mid-afternoon four troopers were wounded and two lay still behind their rocks. Johnny crept up behind Lieutenant Wheat and Sergeant Dolan.

"Someone must go, Mr. Wheat. We are but fifteen miles from Bowie,. I can make it over the mountain."

Wheat shook his head. "You'd never make it, Dolan."

"I can die just as well trying to get help as I can lying here waiting for it. It's worth the try, sir."

Wheat rested his head on his arms. Johnny suddenly realized the lieutenant wasn't much older than he was. What could he do to save them? He had no plans other than to wait for the Apaches' final rush.

"All right, Dolan. Go ahead, and God bless you."

They gripped hands. Dolan laid down his carbine and checked his Colt. He snaked his way to the foot of the cliff and disappeared around a shoulder of rock.

No one was watching Johnny. Lieutenant Wheat was bandaging Birdeck's shoulder wound. Johnny slid backward. He waited until the firing rose in pitch and then slipped behind the rock shoulder. He left his carbine and looked up a narrow slot that traveled slantingly across the cliff out of sight of the trail. Dolan was nowhere to be seen.

It was hard climbing but Johnny reached the top easily. He looked down. The rest of the troopers could have escaped this way, but they wouldn't leave the wounded. Johnny shrugged. He was glad he wasn't in the army. They had no hold on him. He had but one worry—Chicago Johnny Flanagan.

"Where the hell do ye think you're going?"

Dolan leaned across a boulder. His pistol covered Johnny.

"Mr. Wheat sent me to help you, Sergeant."

The Irishman laughed. "You?"

Johnny knew Dolan would chase him back to the doomed troopers. "You'd better get on, Dolan. You haven't much time."

"My ankle is broken."

Johnny's heart leaped. Dolan couldn't stop him now. But a bullet could move faster than Chicago Johnny. His hand closed on a stone.

"Look out behind you, Dolan!"

The sergeant turned. The stone smashed against his gun hand. Johnny leaped forward and snatched the Colt from Dolan's fingers and heaved it over the cliff. He stood there, breathing hard and looking down at Dolan.

"Damn you! You—" Dolan's voice trailed of. He tried to reach Johnny's legs but Johnny 'danced back.

TO JOHNNY'S left a deep steep-sided gully cut to the southwest. That was where Dolan had been heading to get behind the Apaches. Johnny started down. He looked up and dived for the shelter of some rocks. A broad-shouldered Apache had entered the far end of the gully.

"So you'll not get away with it after all."

Johnny cursed Dolan's big mouth.

"He'll find us. You've no escape now. Stay here and die or run back to the boys and die later. You got any ideas now?"

The buck was carrying a Winchester. A knife swung at his hip.

Johnny thought of Lieutenant Wheat, young and yet so respected by his men. He thought of quiet Abe Merkel and good-natured Mehaffey. Of Birdeck, always ready to scrap, now lying with a smashed shoulder. They weren't such a bad bunch of guys.

The warrior laid down his carbine and began to climb the gully side. He was only a man with a knife—Johnny had faced many of them on Chicago's west side. Johnny stood up.

"Zastee! Zastee!"

The Apache leaped sideways and clawed for his knife. Johnny closed the gap between them with two short plunging strides. His left smacked against the buck's jaw, his right thudded over the heart.

The knife came free. Johnny blocked the thrust with his left elbow. His right connected solidly. The buck went sprawling. Blood ran down Johnny's forearm. He kicked at the knife. The Apache dragged at his legs. Johnny sank a heel into his throat. He danced back.

"Time," he said. He must be going crazy. This was no bout.

The Apache leaped to his feet. Johnny tripped. He squared off. A jab straightened the warrior. A hook sent him off balance. A right cross sent him down. Johnny snatched up a rock. He brought it down with all his strength.

"For the love of Heaven!"

Johnny's breath came in great gulps. He turned to look at Dolan.

"It was beautiful, Johnny. You *must* be Irish," Dolan said.

Johnny did not answer. He slid down into the gully and got the carbine. He brought it back up and gave it to Dolan along with the dead Apache's cartridge pouch.

"Now how do I get to Bowie, Dolan?"

Dolan hefted the Winchester. "I'll hold this gully until hell freezes over. 'Tis easy to get to Bowie. Listen well."

Johnny looked back from the far side of the gully. He waved the Apache's knife at Dolan. The sergeant had guts. Johnny was prouder of being Irish then than he had ever been. He turned and trotted through the stunted juniper trees. He was still afraid, but somehow he knew he held the upper hand. Why, they must all be afraid but they did not give in to it.

Hours later he met a column of troopers at the base of the mountain. He described the position of the ambushed party to their officer. "If you go up the trail you can catch the Apaches between you and Lieutenant Wheat's party, sir," he explained.

The officer nodded. "I'll detail a man to guide you back to Fort Bowie."

Johnny grinned. He shook his head. "If you've a spare horse I'll go along. I want to make sure nothing happens to a certain private. And when his shoulder heals I'm going to give him one hell of a beating!"

Featured in the Next Issue

BARB WIRE EMBARGO

A Novel of Fence Warfare

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

The noise of their hoofs woke me up

Cool Killer

By PHIL RAY

When it came to dogs, even a badman had his soft spots!

THE KID rode into our camp late in the afternoon. We could hear his whistle for a long time before we could see him, because this was a big, silent country and small sounds carried for great distances. Then we seen him coming up the trail, taking his time and whistling like he didn't have a care.

It was a kind of sad tune he whistled, lonesome and moody like the big land he rode in. I'd never heard the tune before or since, but whenever it comes back to me now I can see the Kid riding along that way with the lengthening shadows of the hills falling across him.

He didn't have a friend in the world, and I don't know if the Kid ever cared about that or not. Maybe he liked it that way—just him and his pony and the little brown-and-white pooch trailing along behind.

All this was years ago, when there were

still a lot of wild ones over in eastern Nevada. Horses I'm talking about now, because that's what had brought us there, me and Shorty Ellis and Gig Russell. But there were wild men in those days, too. The Kid was one of the last of the old-time badmen of the West, though it's hard for me to think about him now as being very bad.

He could have fooled anyone as far as looks went, for he was as mild looking a man as anyone you might see. He wasn't small, but he wasn't very big either, and he had quiet gray eyes that took their time in looking you over. He must have been well into his twenties at that time, though he didn't look over eighteen. Me and Shorty had seen his picture on dodgers all over the country, and we recognized him right off.

Shorty was fixing a bait and I could see him trying not to show how surprised he was. Finally I spoke up and told the Kid to light down and have a bite with us if he didn't mind a little gravel in his beans and some sand in the biscuit flour. He grinned without saying anything and I watched him get down and unsaddle the good looking little gray and lead him off to a spot where there was good feed, this little brown and white mutt staying right at his heels all the time and minding his own business.

He hobbled the horse and came back to our fire and squatted there. He carried the gun high on his left hip, butt forward, so that when he hunkered down it wasn't in his way, but it was right there where he could reach it easy. I noticed that and I knew Shorty was noticing it, too. We had both heard a lot about this man and his gun.

They said he was a cold, deliberate killer, and his tally at that time was figured to be close to a dozen men. But the Kid was smart and they still hadn't caught up with him. Later, me and Shorty totaled up the amount all the different law enforcement agencies had offered for his hide. It came to over four thousand. In those days that was a lot of iron for a lone man.

THEN GIG RUSSELL came over from the corral and sat on his heels near the fire. Gig was a wiry little bronc fighter. I don't think he knew who the Kid was at first because he never batted an eye. But you never could tell about Gig. He was smart.

In some ways maybe he was too smart, but I had to hand it to him. He knew the wild ones. He showed me and Shorty a lot of things that were new to us. Like using dampers in driving the ponies after they'd been caught. Shorty and me had always used tail or neck hobbles, and sometimes the horses had ended up with bad rope burns. Gig showed us how to cut tiny slits in their nostrils and run a thin strip of rawhide through it, pulling their nostrils together. If the horse tried to run his wind was cut off. It didn't hurt them, either, because after a while the dampness from their noses stretched the rawhide and their nostrils went back to normal.

Timber was scarce in that part of the country and it had been Gig's idea to build the corral out of heavy canvas. He had picked the spot for it, too, a hidden little pocket draw where the ponies couldn't even see it till they were inside. Still, it hadn't been easy. This particular bunch we were after was a little band of good looking mares that had been run a lot by other riders and they had wised up on horse traps.

There was a big bay stallion in the bunch—Booger, we called him. He was swift and hard to follow, but he was a prize and we stayed after him. It took two weeks of chousing around before we finally got Booger and his mares into our canvas corral.

That was the day the Kid rode into our camp.

Gig walked over to the fire and helped himself to a cup of coffee. He tasted it and made a face, winking at me and then looking at Shorty. "You shoulda skimmed the kerosene off it," he said.

When it was Shorty's turn to cook he always got ribbed about it.

Gig looked at the Kid then like he hadn't noticed him before. He pointed

toward the big dutch oven. "Help yourself," he said.

"Thanks," the Kid said, and dipped into the big pot of beans and poured himself a slug of Shorty's black coffee.

"Where'd you get the pooch?" Gig said.

"He just sorta followed along," the Kid said. He handed the little dog half a biscuit and scratched him between the ears while the dog munched on it.

"What's he good for?" Gig said.

The Kid grinned again. "Pot lickin'."

"Reckon Shorty won't have to wash the plates tonight," Gig said, and we all laughed. But it was a kind of uneasy laughter because we all knew who the Kid was by then and the Kid knew that we knew it.

Gig set his tin cup down and walked over to where we had our gear piled. I watched him drag his saddle out and hoist it to his shoulder. I looked at Shorty and Shorty shrugged as if to say he didn't know any more about it than I did.

"You ain't going to ride that Booger hoss now, are you, Gig?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, and packed his rig over to the corral, taking little short, mincing steps with his bowed legs, as if it was a chore for him to be walking at all. Which it was.

GIG HAD SPENT the biggest part of his life forking a saddle and I guess he could ride most anything that grew hair. But he wasn't what I'd call a horseman. I first realized it that day I watched him handle the big red stud. Gig didn't work with a horse; he fought him all the way.

I watched him as he went into the corral and started shaking out his loop. Booger snorted and began tearing around, and I could see the red in his eyes. But it wasn't the horse that interested me right then. It was Gig.

I could see his face and I knew something then that I hadn't known before. Gig was scared. He was scared stiff. That was why he couldn't wait to ride the stud. If he'd had all night to think about it he never would have been able to go into the corral alone with that horse the next day. You didn't meet many horses with all the fire and snuff that old Booger had.

Sometimes I wonder now what it was that made us take up with Gig Russell that spring. Me and Shorty had pardnered around together for several years and we liked it that way. We got along fine and there were never any arguments. But we hadn't done so good mustanging and when Gig came along and showed us some things we didn't know I guess we figured he'd be an asset. In a way he was, but it wasn't the same as when there was just me and Shorty. Gig was too tense. He drove himself too hard and he made everyone else the same way. Me and Shorty liked to take things slow and easy.

I waited till Gig got his rope on the stud, then I crawled into the corral and put a sack over Booger's head and chewed his ear while Gig threw on his kak. The stud's back was arched like a cat's and I could feel every muscle in him as Gig drew up on the latigo. I knew it was going to be a fight. That Booger was all horse. He'd weigh maybe a thousand pounds, which was big for a mustang, and he stood about fourteen hands. His shoulders were heavily muscled and he had the clean lines of the old-time quarter horse. He was short-backed and coupled nice and he had small, neat hoofs that were as hard as flint.

Gig handed me the hackamore and when I slipped it on over Booger's nose I could feel him quiver. I waited till Gig had crunched down solid in his saddle and then I backed away. Gig waited till I was out of the coral before he pulled the blind off. I hated to see Gig ride that horse because I knew what he was going to do to him.

But he didn't do it just the way I expected him to. He gave the stud his head at first, letting him have the first few jumps for free. He rode him close to the saddle, not taking any chances, just sizing him up. Booger was maybe ten, twelve years old at the time and he'd never been rode before. He didn't know any of the tricks. Gig knew them all.

Gig waited until he knew just where he stood and then he started using the quirt.

You seldom see a rider with a quirt these days, but most of the old-time bronc fighters used them. There's nothing discourages a horse from bucking quicker than a good slap across the rump every time he makes a pass at it. So it wasn't the fact that Gig used a quirt that made me sick to my stomach. It was the way he done it. He used a thick piece of braided rawhide that was heavily beaded, and he drew blood every time he brought it down.

BOOGER put up a good fight, but the odds were against him. To begin with, he'd been running all day and he was done in. I guess that was another reason Gig didn't want to wait. If Booger'd had a chance to get his wind it might have been different. This way the stud didn't have much chance. Besides, he had one of the best riders in the country topping him.

It was a fight that didn't last very long, and when Booger was through he just stood there with his head down and his eyes rolled back and the blood dripping from his flanks. Gig looked kind of limp and there was blood spurting from his nose; but he had won and he was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

I looked at Shorty and I knew he hadn't liked seeing it any better than I had.

"Sometimes," Shorty said, "I wish we'd stayed with something easy, like punching cows."

The Kid was still sitting cross-legged by the fire and I noticed he didn't have anything to say. The pooch was stretched out flat beside him. When Gig had unsaddled the bay and come back from the corral he asked the Kid how he'd liked the ride.

"Nice ride," the Kid said, but he wasn't grinning any more.

We watched him get up and walk over to his horse and check the hobbles. The little dog followed along at his heels. The Kid pulled something from the pocket of his jumper and offered it to the horse, stroking the gray's nose while the pony chewed on it.

Gig jerked a thumb in the Kid's direction. "You fellows know who he is?"

"Sure," Shorty said. "He's got his picture in every Post Office from here to Miles City."

"He don't look so tough," Gig said.

"He's got a pretty good reputation," I said.

"We could take him," Gig said. "Easy. There'd be a big reward. Split three ways it'd still be a sizable chunk of money."

Neither Shorty nor I said anything.

"I figure better than a thousand apiece," Gig said. "More money than you'd make in a whole year hightailing around the country after these broomtails."

There was another long period of silence, and finally I said. "Personally, I got nothing against him."

"Me neither," Shorty said.

Gig looked hard at Shorty and then at me. "You're scared," he said.

"You bet," I said.

When the Kid came back and hunkered down again no one said anything. Maybe the Kid knew what we'd been talking about. I don't know. But there was the way his hand never strayed too far from the gun and the way his eyes roved, taking in everything and not missing a move anyone might make.

It grew dark and I yawned and got up and stretched and said I was going to hit the soogans. When I turned in there was still a glow from the fire and I could see the Kid sitting there, absently fondling the mutt's ears, staring into the deep shadows. That was the last I saw of him.

IT WAS the noise of their hoofs that woke me up. I couldn't have been asleep more than an hour or so. Shorty hollered something and I saw him leaping up from his blankets like he'd discovered a rattler in them. The horses were rushing past us so close it's a wonder we weren't trampled. And in the light of the moon I could see the head of old Booger lifted

high and proud and whinnying shrilly as he herded his mares on past us, down the narrow draw and into the night.

Gig was cussing, and I saw him in his long underwear and his flopping shirttail running across to the corral where the gate stood open. But he was too late. Every last one of them had got out.

"It was the Kid," Gig shouted. "It was that damn Kid. He turned 'em loose."

"Yeah," I said to Shorty, "it was the Kid all right."

Gig stood beside us as we watched the last of them disappear in the darkness. He started cussing again. He was mad clean through. But somehow I couldn't feel that way about it, and I knew Shorty didn't either.

"What the hell do you suppose made him do a fool thing like that?" Gig said.

"I dunno," I said, but I was lying.

Then I heard it and I told Gig to shut up because I wanted him to hear it, too. The Kid's soft whistle came floating back to us from the trail below, sad and mournful like the big lonesome country he rode in. The Kid was riding off and Gig was standing there in his long underwear so mad he was shaking. I knew he wanted to ride after the Kid, but neither Shorty nor me would have backed him up if he did. And Gig didn't have the guts to do it alone. . . .

They got the Kid shortly after that, but me and Shorty didn't hear about it until six months or so later. We'd quit running the wild ones by that time. Fact is, we went broke and had to take on a winter job. It was with one of the big outfits up in the Chugwater. We were at this line camp when one of the riders from headquarters came by with supplies and left us a batch of old newspapers. Shorty found the piece about the Kid and asked me to read it to him because Shorty never had much schooling.

It told about how they'd caught up with him in this deserted mountain cabin. A U.S. Marshal and six deputies had surrounded the cabin and started firing on it. Their shots weren't answered at first and they'd figured maybe they had got him with their first fusillade. They were getting ready to advance when the Kid came charging out with his gun blazing. Members of the posse said he was shouting and screaming like he'd gone berserk. He wasn't hitting anything either. They'd dropped him with eight slugs, and most of the men who had watched it said he must have been dead long before he'd quit running.

"Funny," Shorty said. "That's wasn't like the Kid. He wasn't one to lose his head that way."

"Yeah," I said, "it's hard to figure. He was a cool killer. Never got excited."

I went on and read the rest of it. It gave accounts of some of the robberies and killings the Kid had committed in the past. Down in the last paragraph it told about the deputies going into the cabin afterward and finding the bullet-riddled body of a little brown-and-white dog.

Ride the range with Steve Reese and his Cattlemen's Protective Association pals as they heed the call of those in trouble!

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS 25c PER COPY

Through the deluge, she saw red flashes

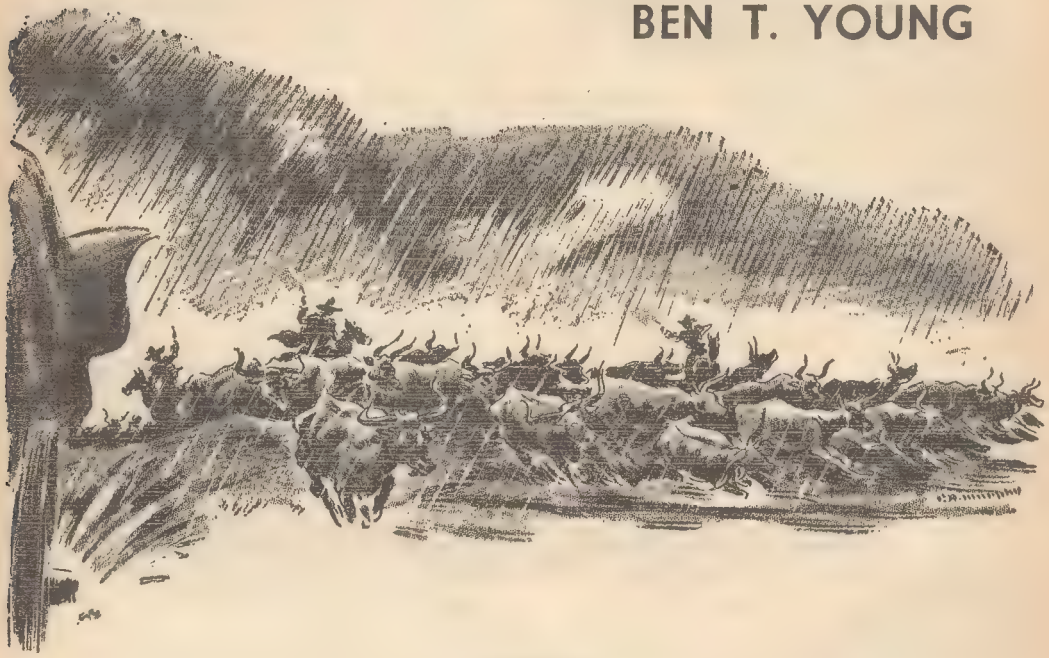
Ab Comstock didn't know just how

lucky he was till the day his life

was saved by the woman he loved!

ALONG the ARKANSAS

a novelet by
BEN T. YOUNG



CHAPTER I

Scorned Man's Revenge

OUT ON the Colorado prairie the blazing sun of mid-afternoon was scorching the sparse grass, and all but bringing the water of the Arkansas River to a boil. Under the canvas fly which served as a cook tent, what with blown sand the scrapers and breaking plows were kicking up, and the buffalo gnats, it was just plain hell.

But Della Kirby wasn't bothering about discomfort just then. Della was mad enough to fight a buzz-saw.

"Get out and stay out!" she fumed at Pete Messick, rubbing the soft flesh of her bare forearm which his hairy paw had touched. "Just because you gave Pa the contract to feed your graders, you can't pester me!"

Messick bared his yellow old fangs in a grin. "Just got you mixed up with them dried peaches you're sorting," he snickered, eyeing the fistful he'd taken from the box. "Only you ain't shrunk and wrinkled by a long shot."

Deeper went the red in Della's cheeks. "Get out!"

Messick's eyes slid over her, from the hem of her long calico skirt to the top of her brown-haired head. Then the eyes, their hot desire turning to amused contempt, shifted to her pa who was nervously slicing antelope steaks for the evening meal.

"Stitt," Messick said. "If this here stepdaughter of your'n don't get more sociable with me, could be I'll turn this boarding

contract over to somebody else. There's a Mexican feeding the track-layers back at Las Animas—"

"Now, now, Mr. Messick," Norton Stitt protested, his puny voice all but lost in the clatter the graders were making up on the right-of-way. "This dust and heat has got Della techy as a teased snake, but she don't intend no impudence. And, Della"—a mean look came into Stitt's chinless face—"bear in mind that we're beholden to Mr. Messick. If you'd get your thoughts off'n that young blacksmith—"

"Comstock?" Messick roared.

"None other, friend," old Barney Tull, the cook, cackled, turning from a pot of beans he'd been stirring. "And mark you this, Messick. If he ever catches you meandering around after Miss Della, he'll work you over."

"Bah!" Messick spat a bit of wormy peach onto the trampled grass. "Should that flat-broke homesteader come bellering around me, I'll mess him up like—"

"Then step outside and commence." Calm as a puddle, Ab Comstock strolled in, threw a wink at Della and gave Messick a twisted grin.

DELLA'S breath caught. Ab was no baby in build, but Messick was bigger, and as a fighter he'd have no more conscience than a grizzly bear.

Right now his bloodshot eyes were glaring back into Ab's cool gray ones, and his right hand was slowly shifting toward the open vent of his shirt under which he likely packed a gun in a shoulder holster.

"Watch out, Ab!" Della warned.

But old Tull was quick under the hat, too. Sudden as lightning he had a butcher knife in his claw, and the point of the blade was against Messick's ribs.

"Reach up," Tull ordered. "Stitt," he said over his shoulder, "take that gun off him."

"No!" Stitt whimpered from the sorghum barrel against which he'd all but collapsed.

Pulling free of Della's hand which had clutched his arm, Ab stepped forward. "Put up your knife, Barney," he said softly. "Now, Messick, from here on just put in all your time letting Miss Della alone."

"And keep out of here, too," Barney ordered. "You may be the big casino hereabouts outside, but in a kitchen the cook's the boss, and I'm the cook. Get!"

"Now, now, Barney," Stitt protested.

"Quiet!" Barney snapped. "You may own this shebang and be the dog with the big brass collar out in the eating tent, but you hired me to cook, so in here I'm the *caporal*, else this Santa Fe Railroad will have to get itself built without my help. Now pull freight, Messick."

Without taking his eyes from Ab's, Messick edged out.

"Doggone it, Della," Stitt whined. "First your ma up and died on me. Now you get uppity and—"

"You worked ma to death, that's what!" Della flared. "But not me. I'm leaving."

Stitt's mouth twisted into a smirk. "You got no way to get back to Las Animas. Mr. Messick won't loan you no conveyance."

"I'll take her," Ab said. "I got a team and wagon I fetched from home to haul my tools and bedroll. I'll take her any time she wants."

Stitt shrugged. "You ain't smart," he told Della. "Messick is a big man. He'll do the grading clean to Pueblo. He'll have money, yet you pass him up for this two-bit cowpoke."

"Hush!" Della protested.

"Leave him talk," Ab said. "Stitt, punching cows is a man's work. It takes more guts than you've got. But I'm a rancher, now, even if I do hove to do a bit of blacksmithing to make both ends meet."

"You ain't in a position to marry," Stitt persisted.

"Who said anything about marrying?" Della demanded. "We've never even talked of it. I'll find a job."

"Doing what?" Stitt snickered. "Maybe a fancy gal in one of them honkeytonks."

With a smack Ab's open hand met the side of Stitt's face. Sideward over a sack of spuds the boarding contractor toppled, and lay there. He wasn't knocked out,

was just too scared to open his trap or move.

"Come on," Ab said to Della. "Gather your truck while I load my outfit on the wagon. I'm leaving for good, too."

"Reckon I'll go along," Barney announced, shucking his flour-sack apron. "I'd ruther cook for a cow outfit any time than this scaly crew. Just toss my bed-tarp in your wagon while I catch up your horses."

In two shakes Della, in the ragged old wall-tent where she slept, was collecting her few possessions. Then a not-far-distant gun roared. Curious, she poked her head outside. Along the right-of-way teams and men, deafened by their own racket, toiled as usual. She looked at the sideless stable tents, empty now save for the litter. Nothing seemed amiss there, or around the circus-size tents where the men slept on straw ticks on the ground.

Then her eyes flicked to the brush shelter under which Ab had his anvil and forge. There, slumped on his side by the water tub, was a man.

"My stars!" she gasped, and as she ran toward him she got a sidelong glimpse of Barney, astride one horse and leading another, coming up from the cottonwood-bordered river on a dead run.

THE man on the ground was Ab. A trickle of blood oozed from a small hole in his back. His face was gray. His breath was just a whisper.

"Oh!" Della moaned, kneeling beside him.

"Messick done it!" Barney panted. "I heard the shot, seen the smoke, and him a-running from behind a clump of saltbush. Now lemme see."

He examined the wound and felt Ab's pulse. "Could be worse," he siged. "The slug's still in there and took some of his shirt in with it. But he ain't breathin' no red bubbles, so I guess his lung ain't punctured. He'll come to when the shock wears off. Now we'll have to get him to a doctor, and 'twixt here'n that end-of-track town is twenty mile over the worst busted-up country God ever let outdoors."

"We'll do it, though," Della declared. "And we'd better hurry before Messick interferes. Bring hot water and whisky. Tear up a clean petticoat you'll find on my cot. Then bring some men to help lift him into the wagon."

So intent had they been on Ab that they'd failed to notice the man, a straw-boss under Messick, who had cat-footed to where the horses were grazing nearby.

"Nobody's a-going nowhere!" he announced, slapping the colt on his hip.

"The hell you preach!" Barney yelled, grabbing a farrier's hammer and throwing it quicker than a prairie-dog hunts cover.

Squarely between the eyes the tool took the surprised jigger. Backward he toppled, against the touchy hocks of the nearest horse. With a snort the horse leaped forward and let fly with his heels. They connected.

Once the straw-boss twitched, then lay still. Dropping the tongs he'd snatched off the anvil, Barney relieved him of gun and belt.

"Now I'll fetch them things you mentioned, then hitch the team," Barney said. "We got no time to lose if we're a-going to outsmart Messick and save this boy."

"We'll save him," Della vowed, rising. "I'll hitch the team while you're gone. Hurry!"

Born and raised on her own father's farm, Della could manage horses, and had them harnessed and hooked up by the time Barney came hustling back. Packing a tow-sack partially filled with something, Stitt preceded Barney, urged on by the muzzle of his own carbine in Barney's hands.

"He's a-bringing what supper I could wrangle in a hurry," Barney explained. "Case we find time for a snack. And I've brung this old musket of his because we may need it. The pay I got coming will buy it and the grub, and then some."

Casting anxious eyes toward the lowering sun, Della took the water, whisky and cloth from Barney and knelt by Ab. Having acquired some skill in doctoring hurts while on the farm, she quickly had the blacksmith in shape to be moved.

"Now, Stitt," Barney ordered, having spread Ab's bed in the wagon-box. "Help me lift the poor feller up. And don't lag because them graders will knock off work soon, and Messick will be around. Now!"

When Ab was aboard, Della climbed up beside him and took his head in her lap. The gun found in his bedroll she had within reach. Stitt, on the ground again, cast a worried look toward the right-of-way.

"Maybe I'd best go along," he bleated. "When Messick finds Della gone, and the cook too, he'll swarm all over me."

Turning on the seat, Barney looked at Della. "Me, I'd leave the old vinegarroon here."

"I'd like to," she sighed. "Still, it does sort of seem inhuman because he's such a coward. Get in, Pa. But after we reach town I never want to see you agin. Go ahead, Barney. Hurry!"

Instead of heading down the Arkansas toward Las Animas, Barney turned into the thirty-mile-long alamo grove which gave that country its name of Big Timbers.

"If Messick has a mind to run us down he'll line out straight for town," he explained to Della over his shoulder. "Many's the time I crossed these parts with trail herds, so I knows it like the back of my hand. And I'm a-going to outfox Messick by crossing this river, heading for the Picketwire, and siding it down to Fort Lyon, t'other side of town, where I know there's a Army sawbones. This way's further but safer."

DELLA pointed out, "But Messick can trail us."

"Could, but won't think to. Nope, if he chooses to come after us, and can get some of the rougher formations to side him, they'll go a-hellin' straight for town. Anyways, that's my guess. And I reckon he'll choose to come after us. He don't aim to lose you, nor leave us sick the law—such as it is hereabouts—on him for bushwhacking Ab. It sure would pleasure Messick to put me'n Ab to bed with a shovel. Then he'd have you out on a branch and him with the saw."

"What about me?" Stitt whined, gripping the sideboard as the wagon lurched hub-deep into the river.

"You're no worry to him," Della declared. "You haven't enough sand to scour a tin cup. You'd turn me over to him in a minute, to save your hide or gain a dollar."

"I ain't so bad," Stitt pouted. "Leastwise your ma didn't think so."

"Maybe not at first," Della conceded. "But she soon found out. She should have known that a man who'd ducked from both sides of the War was no good, and would court a veteran's widow just to get her farm, then lose it for debt."

"Your pa was a soldier, Della?" Barney asked.

She nodded. "Killed at Shiloh."

"Me, I rode with the Fifth Texas. How's Ab?"

"His breathing is stronger, and—" She laid a hand on his forehead— "no fever so far. We'd best not dawdle, though."

CHAPTER II

The Runaways

AS THE wagon creaked up and down and around the hills on the way to the Purgatoire, Della did her best to ease the jolts for Ab, whose head still rested in her lap. She was getting cramped, sitting cross-legged, with her back against the edge of the board which served as a driver's seat. Now and again she'd fling a disdainful look at Stitt, who sat hanging to the tail-gate and staring back toward the graders' camp now far behind.

Mostly, though, she gazed down into Ab's face, and wondered about him. Only a month before he'd joined the ever-westward-moving construction outfit to replace the older blacksmith a mule had kicked over the Great Divide. At once

something akin to love had surged up within her. Whether it was really love or only loneliness she wasn't yet quite sure. And while he'd shown a great liking for her it had, as far as she knew, stopped right there. He was friendly and attentive, but certainly not impassioned.

About him she knew almost nothing. He'd mentioned cow outfits he'd worked for, and trips he'd made with trail herds up to Montana. He'd said something about a "little old shirt-tail spread he was shaping up" on a small river called the Apishapa somewhere west near the Spanish Peaks.

She wondered if he'd been lonely. She hoped so, hoped he felt the need for a partner and would ask her to share his venture. But first she had to see that he got well again. If he lacked the wherewithal for medical care and food and such like, she'd find work and earn it. For had he not intervened in her behalf he'd not be in this mess.

Save for the moon it was dark now, and on and on they lurched and bumped. She'd doze, come awake with a start. "Whyn't we stop and eat?" Stitt whined.

"I'm hungry, too," she scolded. "And so is Barney, but we'll not stop short of the Army hospital. How much farther, Barney?"

Barney turned on the seat. "I figure we now ain't more'n a whoop'n-a-holler from the Picketwire. When we hit that we got maybe eight more miles to go. Must be about nine o'clock now. How's Ab?"

She laid her hand on Ab's forehead, and jumped as though it had burned her. "Barney!" she said so sharply that he pulled the team up short. "Now he's got fever!"

"Stitt, come hold these horses," Barney ordered.

Though the night was sultry, Della shivered. With better than two hours to go before reaching a doctor—

"Lemme look." Barney knelt beside Ab and fired a match.

"Oh!" Della's heart gave a great lurch. Ab's face was flushed. His lips were moving.

Putting an ear close, Barney listened. "Talking to hisself like a sheepherder," he muttered. "Guess that piece of shirt in there has made a poison."

Della's heart was racing. She remembered that once, when she was a kid, a wounded hunter had been carried into their farm-house, and in the excitement no one had thought to put her out of the room where her mother was treating the hurt. Wide-eyed she'd watched and listened, and if she could now just remember—

"Is that river you call the Picketwire the nearest water?" she asked.

"Yes'm."

"Then get us there quickly. Don't mind the jolts."

"Yes'm." Barney was already on the seat with the reins in hand. "Leave'm go, Stitt! Git moving, boys!"

Lunging into their collars the boys left for elsewhere, and Stitt barely managed to clamber over the tail-gate. It was a head-long scalp-shifting ride over rocks that shot sparks, and through pungent sage and mesquite that scraped the wagon-box and spinning wheels.

Aside from hoping they didn't upset, Della gave it no thought; just prayed silently that they'd not be long on the way, that she'd remember what to do, and manage to do it right. For Ab must not die out there on the lonely prairie. Ab mustn't die anywhere!

"Whoa!" Standing spraddle-legged, Barney sawed on the reins. "Whoa!"

Sitting on their tails the team skidded, and when they'd stopped the sudden silence was broken only by the ripple of water.

"Get a fire going," Della told Stitt as she slid her numbed legs from beneath Ab's head.

SHE could barely stand, but clambered over the sideboard and leaned against a wheel. "Barney, if those are willows yonder, cut me a switch, then find a cottonwood and dig up a section of root. There's a hatchet under the seat, if it hasn't bounced out. First, though, you'd

better unhook the team."

"What you going to make coffee in?" Stitt asked, fumbling about in search of wood.

Della almost swore with exasperation. "We're not bothering about coffee! I'm—" She stopped short. She must have hot water, but there was nothing in which to heat it.

"I know you're rememberin' now, like me, that we left that kettle at Ab's shack," Barney said, unhooking the pole-straps. "But in the grub-sack is some of Messick's private groceries, including canned yams. We'll ax open a can and use it. I reckon you'll be wanting soap, too. Stitt, hustle up with that fire, then hunt some of them yucca plants or Spanish bayonet or soapweed, whichever name you know it by. Fetch the roots to Della. They lather up good, Della. Squaws and Mexican women both use 'em."

When everything needed was finally assembled, she washed her hands and the blade of Barney's clasp-knife, then sterilized them with whisky. She shaped a point on a pencil-long length of the willow switch. She told Barney to pour some of the liquor down Ab's throat to brace him against the coming ordeal.

"Pa," she said to Stitt, "heat this knife blade. Now, Barney, peel his shirt and that old bandage off, and see if you can keep him from squirming and hold that torch, too."

The acrid smoke from the burning mesquite root sickened her. That, and the dread of what she had to do. And it was so dreary and ominous out there, with an owl hooting dismally, and distant thunder muttering like the far-off funerial bass notes of a church organ.

But she clenched her teeth, and while Barney held Ab and the light, she began to carefully work the pointed stick into the wound with a twisting motion.

Ab twitched and she faltered. "Want I should do it?" Barney muttered.

She shook her head, held her breath and took another turn or two, then began to withdraw the stick. Would this do it, or would she have to try again? Dizzy with nausea she closed her eyes.

"Got it, by Judas!" Barney cried, and she opened them to see that the stick was out and there was a bit of blood-soaked cloth wound about it.

"Get the slug?" Stitt asked idly, not giving a damn.

Though the ordeal was not yet over, Della felt relief. "No," she said. "I can feel it just under the skin of his chest. It's doing no harm and can wait for the doctor. Bring that knife."

When the wound had been cauterized with the hot blade she made a poultice with the scrapings of cottonwood root bark, and bound it on. A large round stone, heated at the fire, was placed at Ab's bootless feet, and he was covered to the chin with all the blankets and soogans they could find.

"Now," she sighed wearily, again taking his head in her lap. "If the poison is out the fever will go. If he begins to cool off soon, he'll have a chance. Let's get started."

Though almost played out she was no longer sleepy. In fact she felt a sort of elation, realizing now the depth of her feeling for Ab. It was far more than a desire to escape loneliness and achieve security. It was something she couldn't get straight in her own head, but she felt it with all her being.

And Ab's fever was receding. That was evident before they'd traveled three miles. "He's safe," she said, tugging at the back of Barney's open vest to attract his attention.

"Good enough." He turned to peer down at her. "Another hour or so and we'll all be—Hist!" He stopped the team.

Tense as drawn bowstrings they listened. Clouds now hid the moon, and off in the darkness to the left, horses were passing and men were grumbling.

"I seen a fire down this a-way," they heard a man insisting. "Just a flicker, I'll admit, and I can't see it now."

"Messick's outfit!" Barney whispered, then cat-footed down the wagon tongue to grab the horses' nostrils before they whinnied.

Della felt for Ab's gun she'd kept beside her. "Gimme that," Stitt whispered. "If need be you can reach my carbine on the foot-board."

RELUCTANTLY she handed him the revolver. Quick as powder he fired it into the air. "Hi, Messick, this way!" he yelled, and vanished.

Like wolves the pack came rushing. Snorting and plunging, the spooked team got astraddle of tongue and traces. The wagon all but upset. Hanging to their bits, Barney had his hands full without drawing his gun.

Those Pesky Critters!

COYOTES are not only present over most of their ranges of pioneer days but have actually extended it, even appearing on the outskirts of cities. Despite the lack of welcome they receive from man, these little wolves of the prairie find it profitable to hang around his settlements and ranches, where they can snap up poultry, lambs and shoats, and feast on carrion and garbage.

—William Carter

Lightning flashed. Della got a glimpse of six or eight mounted men blocking the way.

"Well, Tull," one of them snarled. "Your little pasear is ended. Climb aboard and we'll side you home."

"Messick"—Barney's voice was deadly calm—"just step all over yourselves a-getting out of—"

There was a thud. The team began to back, and a man swore as he grabbed and stopped them. "Old fool's head's so hard I bet my gun barrel's bent," another growled.

By now Della was on her feet with the carbine cocked. At first she'd been scared as a rabbit in a coyote's mouth, but now she was sure on the prod.

"Listen, Mr. Messick!" she stormed. "You just put that poor old man here in the wagon with the other one you nearly murdered, and help me get them to town! If either one dies—"

Over her mouth a hand was clapped, and the carbine was snatched away. "I've caught the little wildcat, Mr. Messick!" Stitt yelled, holding her tight. "This is her pa. 'Twas me called you over."

Out of the darkness Messick loomed beside the wagon. "Thought you run off with 'em. Stitt."

"Shucks, no," Stitt scoffed, laying aside the carbine and struggling to hold Della still. "First thing I knowed, old Tull bulged into the kitchen, grabbed my gun and kidnaped me to I couldn't warn you they was leaving. It was right after you shot Comstock."

Messick laughed. "*You* shot Comstock, Stitt. Two, three these here boys seen you."

Astounded, Stitt released his hold on Della, and she sank back against the wagon seat.

"You lie, Messick!" Stitt screamed. "From behind the kitchen woodpile I seen you shoot Comstock, and I'll so tell the sheriff!"

"Nobody would believe a forked-tongued doublecrosser like you," Messick jeered. "Anyhow, you'll never tell no sheriff nothing, for when somebody some day rides this way they'll find your bones along with Tull's and Comstock's. I just changed my plans."

Whirling, to leap off the other side of the wagon, Stitt came up against the muzzle of a cocked gun.

"Now," Messick said, reaching for Della.

Drawing away, she wondered if she could snatch up the carbine in time.

"What makes you think I won't talk?" she asked, playing for time.

Messick snickered. "If you're smart you'll never open your trap. Should I ever git the notion you're about to, I'll 'tend to yar."

Quicker then scat she dropped to her knees and grabbed the carbine. She'd knocked Stitt off balance, and as he fell forward a gun roared. He yelped, and hell was out of its shuck again.

CHAPTER III

Alone in the Dark

NEARING, Messick's horse was pawing the air. Then the cocked carbine went off, and the entangled team began tearing up the harness.

"What goes on?" a new voice demanded above the uproar. So loud and wrathful was the question that it cowed both men and horses. The voice from beside the wagon went on, "We got a trail herd bedded down just across the river, and they're spooked enough by the coming storm without all this yelling and shooting. What's the matter?"

"Well," Messick answered, suddenly polite as a bartender to a U. S. marshal. "Me'n the boys just caught up with some polecats who'd stole a team and wagon, and—"

"Keno," the cowman growled, reining his horse away. "Now you've caught 'em, haul out of here quiet."

"Mister!" Della called. "You haven't got the right of it!"

"Great snakes, a woman!" the puncher came back. "What is it, ma'am?"

"You haven't got the straight of it," she repeated. "The leader of this bunch shot a man at the railroad graders' camp. I've got the wounded man here in the wagon, which is his. With the cook's help I was trying to get to a doctor when these men jumped us."

"She's lyin'," Messick cut in.

"Quiet, you." The order was followed by the click of a gun hammer reaching full cock. "I don't know how many of you there is, but should ary one try to pull a sandy on me, you'll get combed out by the toughest bunch of boys that ever rode up from Texas. Now pull foot. I'll take care of this outfit, and should it turn out that the team and wagon is your'n, we'll leave it at Las Animas on the way by *Vamoose!*"

Silently, like slinking coyotes, Messick and his crew faded away.

"Now, ma'am," the Texan said, "let's see what can be did about untangling that team."

"Thanks for believing me." Della had knelt beside Ab. "I want to see how my patient stood all that ruckus. And the cook who was driving us is lying hurt, maybe dead."

"Dead, hell!" a shaky but furious voice exploded. "I got a headache built for a horse, but soon's I tie this team so they won't run off, I'll be in the running again."

"Old Barney Tull!" the Texan cried. "Many's the time I've helped snake your chuckwagon out of bog holes. Still making them whang-leather biscuits?"

Barney was beside the wagon now. "Ike Wallop, you old rooster!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Meet Miss Della Kirby, who's got more grit than a Panhandle wind. The jigger asleep there is Ab—How is Ab doing, Della?"

"Seems all right."

"*Bueno.* Ab used to ride fer the Currycomb and them outfits down along the Pecos."

"I be dogged," Wallop drawled. "The boys over to our wagon yonder will sure be glad to see you all, and come sunup we'll side you safe into town. Let's get your outfit shaped up and be traveling."

"Don't go off and leave me," a voice pleaded from beneath the wagon. "I'm gut-shot."

"A skunk named Stitt," Barney explained to Wallop. "After what he done

he should ought to be left for the buzzards."

"We'll make room for him," Della sighed. "We're sure obliged to you, Mr. Wallop, for helping us out of this mess. It looked for a while— What's that?"

"Barney's went down like a empty sack," Wallop said.

Hurriedly she got to the ground. Wallop, kneeling beside Barney, had lit a match. The faint yellow light showed the lined old face to be stained with dried blood.

"Old mossyhorn can't take rough handling no more," Wallop growled, feeling Barney's heart. "But he'll live can we get him to a doctor."

Turning, Della laid her forearm along the sideboard and her head upon it. "Somehow I must do it." Then a sob shook her, a sob due not to loss of nerve, but because she was so very, very tired.

"There, now, ma'am." Wallop touched her shoulder. "You're plumb wore out, but don't fret no more because you're safe as fleas on a porcupine's back. Just climb aboard and rest while I unsnarl them ponies and get Barney and the other coot loaded."

SHE wanted to help but he'd have none of it, so she sat slumped on the seat, trying to keep awake. Shortly he had things shaped up, tied his pony to the tail-gate and stepped up beside her.

"Now, ma'am." He released the brake. "Here we go."

On downstream he drove for perhaps a half-mile. "We're clear of the herd now and won't booger 'em," he muttered, turning into the water.

As the team topped the opposite bank the storm hit. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and rain and hail lashed down like hell torn loose in Georgia. The earth shook, and even through the deluge she could see red flashes, hear shots.

"There goes them cows!" Wallop yelled, fighting the frantic team. "Boys trying to bend 'em."

"You go help!" Della yelled back, grabbing the reins.

After a moment's hesitation he jumped to the ground, and the next flash of lightning showed him loping away.

Now she was utterly alone, with a frenzied team she could no longer hold, and three helpless men to care for. Balls of blue fire played about the horses' ears, hailstones bruised her neck and shoulders, hoof-flung mud pelted her streaming face, and her arms ached with straining.

She told herself, Keep turning 'em, and concentrated her strength on the nigh-side rein. But the runaways refused to face the storm, and she had to let them go.

A wheel struck a rock and the outfit tipped crazily. They hit a water-filled depression and skidded like an oiled eel. They hit something else, and that was the end. The tugs snapped. Still gripping the lines she was jerked over the footboard and lit with a splash. Then oblivion. . . .

It was not injury but complete exhaustion which had knocked her out, and she soon revived, shivering in the mud. The worst of the storm had passed. There was just a slow drizzle. She got to her feet and sloshed back to the wagon.

"Ab," she said fearfully, peering into the wet tangle of arms and legs.

She didn't expect an answer but got one.

"Don't know where I'm at, but I don't like, it," Ab said, with a hint of a chuckle in his weak voice. "Whoever was driving this outfit should a knowed it's better to be late than absent. And this coot laying cross-wise on me sure nosed his way to the bottom of too many glasses. He's drunk as a cantina fiddler."

By this time Della was up beside him. "This is Della," she said, taking his hand. "How do you feel?"

"Like the end of a dogfight, ma'am. How'd we get here, wherever it is?"

Briefly she explained.

"Well, I'm sure obliged," he said, when she'd finished, and she wondered if she'd only imagined the increased pressure of his hand on hers. "Now we'll get old Barney to the doctor."

"Lie still," she cautioned. "You're not out of danger yourself. I'll handle this."

But how? In no direction could she see

anything but wet blackness. The Texans' camp might be any place; or no place, if those stampeding longhorns had hit it. Yet if she sat there doing nothing till daylight, it might then be too late to save Barney. She thought, And Pa too. Even if he is a Judas I'll do what I can for him.

She wondered if any of the three guns were still in the wagon. She might fire one at intervals as a distress signal. But who would come? The Texans, those who weren't piled up in some arroyo, trampled into the mud by pounding hoofs, were probably clear into Kansas by this time. And she wanted no more truck with Messick, who might still be chousing around.

The drizzle had stopped. That, at least, was something to be grateful for. But the air and everything else was cold and wet, and the wounded might get lung fever. Despite the risk of attracting Messick she decided to have a fire.

She remembered that Barney carried a few matches in a corked brass shotgun shell in his pants pocket. These she found, but the stopper had loosened and the matches were damp. She recalled seeing her father, under such circumstances, rub the match heads through his hair, after which they could be fired. But her hair was sopping and she ruined one match.

"What you doing, ma'am?" Ab asked.

SHE told him.

"What you aim to burn in your fire?"

"Parts of your wagon, if you don't mind. The tongue is smashed anyhow, and we don't need the sideboards. The under side of the seat is dry enough to make shavings for a start. But these matches are all wet!"

"Look," Ab said. "Here's a old cowboy trick: Take match between the palms of your hands, leaving the head stick up a little. Roll back and forth fast as you can for a minute or so. Then, if it wasn't plumb drowned, you can light it easy as eating peaches out of a can."

Shortly, after finding the hatchet still beneath the seat, she had a blaze started as close to the wagon as seemed safe. As the circle of light widened she prowled about and found some greasewood which, after a moment's drying, blazed up like a burning haystack. One by one she'd remove a soogan or blanket spread over the three casualties, hold it to the fire till it was at least less damp, replace it and take another.

"Ma'am," Ab protested, "you'd best wrap one of them around yourself and sit quiet. You must be used up."

"I'm all right," she fibbed, pleased at his solicitude, and went on with her task.

She reflected, He's so nice. Even under these circumstances he's cheerful, and thoughtful of others.

She thought Wallop seemed nice too. She hadn't the least idea what he looked like, but he'd been kindly. She hoped nothing had happened to him, that he'd hurry back to help save Barney, for she was beholden to Barney.

Lifting her head suddenly, she listened, then hastened out of the firelight. Messick? No, Messick was no singer, and this hombre was yowling like a coyote with bronchitis. Now she could make out the words:

Old Aunt Sukey was a fine old squaw,
Finest ever stepped along the Arkan-saw.

Abruptly, slicker-clad and on a pinto pony, the admirer of Aunt Sukey sloshed into the light.

"Here's that man again, ma'am." He grinned, touching his soggy hat, and she knew it was Wallop. "Good thing you made that fire else I'd a-spent till daylight wandering round aimless like a horse with the bridle off. How's the sick folks?"

"I'm most worried about Barney, now," she said. "Lose many cows?"

"Won't know till daylight. The boys bended 'em, got 'em churning round, and they stopped running over yonder about four miles. The cook's got the fire going again and grub on, so I'll just drive you over."

"The team's gone," she broke in, and told how it happened.

"Dogged if you ain't stood enough to make a man tromp on little chickens," he

declared, wagging his head. "But don't fret. We won't be moving today, so I'll go fetch the chuckwagon team and haul you over. 'Tain't far and I won't be long. *Adios.*"

As he jogged away he began singing. He bawled:

O-o-h, I went to the boss to draw my roll,
He figgered me out nine dollars in the hole.

CHAPTER IV

Conquests

INTO the distance the voice faded, and for the first time in days Della found herself similing.

"These parts are full of nice men as well as bad ones," she murmured.

"Noisy coot," Ab complained. "S'pose that's your Mr. Wallop."

Her smile widened. "Yes."

"Well, don't go trusting strangers too far."

"As I told you, he's a friend of Barney's."

"Well, like as not Barney has known some hard formations."

"Knowed hell!" Barney protested. "I *know* 'em. I ain't dead yet by a damn sight. Ike Wallop woke me up with his cater-wauling, and I know what's a-goin' on."

Like persimmons after a frost, Della's troubles were falling away. "Barney!" She was hurrying to the wagon. "How *are* you?"

"Don't like the way I'm organized here," he fussed. "My scalp feels as though a Comanche had worked on it with a war-club, which is bad enough without finding myself in such bad company as Stitt."

"Oh!" Stitt whimpered so piteously that Della's hair stirred.

But, save taking him to the hospital, there was nothing she could do for him. An abdominal wound was no thing for a tyro to tamper with.

Soon after daylight, Wallop returned, leading a harnessed team of broncs. "Horse wrangler says your ponies turned up in our remuda," he reported, starting to rig makeshifts for the missing tongue and seat. "He'll catch 'em up by'n by."

Before long they were at the bedraggled camp where the fagged hands not with the herd did the best they could for them in the way of food and coffee.

"Wallop," the *caporal* said, then, "you drive 'em right on up to the fort. These here jiggers, specially the gut-shot one, need fixing. And Miss Kirby needs rest."

As they started for the fort, Wallop helped Della to the driver's seat. Twisting his head around, Ab glared. "Plenty room back here for you, ma'am."

"Now, sick folks," Wallop drawled, making her comfortable as possible, "there's plenty room up here beside me, too. It's easier riding, and Miss Kirby needs all the ease she can get."

Della was feeling increasingly good. It was, of course, partly due to the hot food and coffee, the warm sunshine which had dried her dress so it no longer stuck to her like a bobcat's pelt, and relief at her charges' safety and her own. But it was nice, too, to have respectful attention from nice young men; almost be quarreled over, in fact.

However, Wallop talked little on the way up. A sudden shyness, perhaps, or the fact that Ab was listening. It was late morning when they bumped across the ruts of the Santa Fe Trail, crossed the Arkansas, and climbed the bluff to Fort Lyon. From a distance Della had seen it before, but now she got a good look at the parade ground, the long low buildings of flat stones laid up in mud mortar.

"Say, friend," Wallop called to a passing soldier, "where's the first fiddle?"

Halting, the man glared, and Della recalled hearing that for some reason or other, cowhands and soldiers got along like strange dogs.

From Wallop, the soldier's eyes flicked

to her, and showed interest. "Headquarters is by the flagstaff, ma'am." He smiled, touching his cap.

"Perhaps you'd best let me handle this," she said to Wallop as he again started the team. Grumpily he nodded and drove on to the building indicated. And as the sentry faced them and brought his carbine to the port, she smiled prettily. "I'd like to speak to the commanding officer, please."

Backing into the open doorway, the sentry called to someone inside. Promptly a lieutenant emerged, strutting like a turkey gobbler.

"I'm the post adjutant, madam," he announced, standing ramrod-straight. "What is it you wish?"

"We wish—" Wallop began in the same toplofty tone, but Della's elbow in his ribs stopped him short.

"I have here three badly wounded men from the railroad graders' camp," she explained. "They must have medical attention, and I was told that your hospital—"

"Our hospital is for the military only," the lieutenant snapped. "If our surgeon treated all the frontier hoodlums—"

ONE jump took Della to the ground. With chin aimed at the sky she marched past him and the grinning sentry, and through the doorway. Up from a table popped a sergeant-major, but she ignored him too, and went straight to a tall lean old file who stood with his back to her, staring out a side window. His shoulder straps looked pretty heavy with stuff, and that's what she wanted.

Right behind her was the indignant adjutant, and he spoke first.

"Sir," he said. "This young woman—"

Turning, the major glared. His eyes, Della thought as hers met them squarely, were cold and hard as hailstones. She felt disheartened. The glare had even silenced the adjutant.

"Mister," she said, "excuse me for bothering you, but I must have help. Yesterday there was trouble at the railroad graders' camp on west of here. Through no fault of their own, the blacksmith and cook got badly hurt. The boarding contractor, who is my stepfather, was shot, too. Because they need a doctor's attention I've brought them all the way in a wagon, through last night's storm and all. They're steaming out there in the sun, and I'd like to get them into your hospital."

The major shook his head. "There's constant brawling and bloodshed in these frontier towns and construction camps, and to keep hospital space and my surgeon's time free to care for my own men and their families, I've had to issue an order to take in no outsiders.

"But these men may die without help!" she said desperately. "As I understand it, your Sixth Cavalry is here partly to protect the railroad workers from the Indians, because the construction of the railroad is necessary for the development of the country and an advantage to the Government. Now these wounded men with me were helping to build that railroad, and I just don't see why they can't be helped!"

"The only civilians I might feel obliged to make room for," the major interrupted, "would be veterans of the late War, old soldiers."

"One of these is a veteran!"

The major's gimlet eyes narrowed. "What regiment?"

"Fifth Texas."

A snicker broke from the adjutant, and the sun wrinkles about the major's eyes deepened with amusement. Even Della had to laugh.

"Well, Barney's a good American anyhow," she said, "then that's all that matters now. If you'd just take them in, I'll pay for any medicines and food and whatever. Maybe some of the officers' wives need a cook or somebody to help out."

"That does it," the major admitted. "Although you already had me licked. We have a new cook coming out from Leavenworth, but until she arrives, perhaps a week from now, you could help us out." He told the adjutant, "Mr. Watson, take these people to the hospital. Present my compliments to the surgeon and tell him the men are to be cared for. Then escort

the young lady to my quarters and introduce her to my wife."

After the men had been carried into the hospital, Della asked the adjutant to wait a moment while she thanked Ike Wallop.

"That's all right, ma'am," Ike said, holding the hand she'd offered. Some distance off the adjutant coughed impatiently, but Ike paid him no heed. "Now when a man's fixed for slow traveling like Comstock is," he continued, "I don't like to try and undercut him. We're trailing them cows up Powder River way, and when we come back I'm a-going to track you down."

"Please, Ike." Tears were appearing in Della's eyes. "I'm grateful, and I like you a lot. But Ab Comstock is the man I want."

"He asked you to throw in with him?"

"No, but— Well, you see how it is, don't you?"

"Plain as the ears on a mule." Ike grinned ruefully, releasing her hand and backing off. "Well, *adios* and good luck, ma'am. You could do worse than latch onto Comstock. I hear he's got himself a rancho, while me, I'm just a fiddle-foot. We'll be passing by town *mañana,* and we'll leave his team and wagon at the feed corral."

THAT afternoon, as she worked about the major's kitchen, her emotions were mixed. She was happy because the bullet had been removed from Ab's chest. Barney's scalp was sewed up and there seemed to be no skull injury. Of her pa's condition the gruff but kindly contract surgeon was more close-mouthed. Then the major's wife, very gracious, had insisted that Della take a nap, and had loaned her clothing till her own could be refurnished and added to.

About Ike Wallop, though, Della felt badly. He was so nice, and she'd probably never see him again. Of course Ab was the man. Something about him stirred her inexplicably, and she'd put all her blue chips on him. But if he wasn't the marrying kind, it would be bad.

After the evening meal the major, his wife and kids complimented her on her cooking. Some money was advanced to her for the purchase of personal necessities, and it was arranged that she should go in to Las Animas to buy them the following afternoon, when the post ambulance went for the mail.

That night she slept well. No torn canvas flapping in the wind. No fear of rattlers, or Messick. And, though confusing, her dreams were pleasant. Ab was in them all, and now and again Ike would appear, laughing and singing, then fade again. She awoke refreshed and happy. Her troubles seemed to be ironed out; that is, if it developed that Ab cared for her as she cared for him. That remained to be seen. . . .

Las Animas, that summer of 1875, was a town with the bark still on. Most of the doors swung both ways, and were kept in constant motion by cowmen, soldiers and railroaders, all bent on spilling some red paint. There were, of course, a few places devoted to more humdrum business and before the largest of these, a general merchandise store, the soldier-driver halted the ambulance.

It was the same soldier, one Reid O'Dell, whom Ike had questioned the morning before. Della suspected, from the joshing remarks of other troopers as they'd driven off the post, that he'd somehow got himself detailed to the job when he'd learned she was going. He'd certainly dawdled on the four-mile drive. He'd sat mighty close, and used his bold eyes a lot.

But, worried again, Della had paid him scant heed. That morning the surgeon had told her bluntly that Ab wouldn't be his old self again for several months, and should do no hard work—especially blacksmithing—due to his damaged back and chest muscles.

"The oldest fellow," the doctor had continued, "is finished for hard work."

Of Stitt, only intermittently conscious, the doctor was still evasive. "At any rate," he'd said, "he'll need medical care for a long time."

So Della was bothered. How could she care for them? The major could afford to pay her only a small wage, and soon

the regular cook would arrive. Then what? The several married junior officers could afford no help at all, and a frontier town like Las Animas offered almost no opportunity for a decent woman to earn a living. Yet money she must have.

Now that O'Dell had the mules tied at the hitch-rail already crowded with drowsing cowponies, he lifted her down to the plank sidewalk under the wooden awning.

"Della," he began. "You—"

"I'll be ready to go back in a few minutes," she said hurriedly, drawing away from him.

With a shrug, muttering something about the postoffice being in there too, he followed her inside.

Soon through with her buying, she found him waiting by the door, the mail-sack at his feet, one hand resting on the butt of his service revolver, and a bag bulging with candy in the other.

"Not very good," he said wryly, offering it to her. "But it's the best I can do in the way of entertainment."

CHAPTER V

The Men in Her Life

OUT of town they drove again, but in the wrong direction.

"Just taking a little drive," O'Dell explained, noting her surprise. "Back by Retreat, and you'll still have time to get the Old Man's supper."

With a nod she agreed. O'Dell was rather exciting, and she felt competent to handle him if necessary. Too, she could perhaps forget her troubles for an hour or so.

"They tell me," O'Dell said, pointing with his whip toward a far distant mountain, just a faint blue hump on the shimmering skyline, "that from about here Lieutenant Pike first saw that peak which he named after himself."

Della looked politely, paying more heed to the fact that the last of the settlement was now behind them. Far ahead a dust cloud hung like a golden haze close to the ground, and she wondered if the recent rain hadn't reached this far north. On the left of the lonely road was the timber-bordered Arkansas. To the right, just sagebrush.

Should O'Dell turn from history to personal things, what should she say?

Ah, a covered wagon was coming up behind them at a good clip. Home-seekers, probably; or an Army wagon hauling supplies to the surveyors' military escort. At any rate its presence would temporarily stay O'Dell, and soon as it passed she would insist on turning about.

Closer and closer it drew, and from the tail of her eye she saw two rough-looking men on the driver's seat. Shortly it came alongside, hogging the road, and drawing a muttered curse from O'Dell.

Abrupt as a bronc's kick it happened. Leaning from the seat, the man beside the driver slugged O'Dell with a musket barrel, and before the mules could bolt, someone grabbed Della from behind and dragged her off the ambulance seat.

The yelp she loosed was promptly stiffled. Heaved over the wagon's tail-gate she was again seized. Having scarcely halted, the wagon now really began rolling, and she fought to free herself. Through the rear opening in the wagon cover she got a glimpse of the stampeded mules bouncing the ambulance toward the river. Half over the dashboard hung the blue-clad body of O'Dell.

Messick! She knew, even before she saw him.

"Now, you little hell-cat," Messick panted when he and the man who had first grabbed her had succeeded in stuffing a bandanna into her mouth and binding her wrists and ankles. "I've been waiting for you to show up in town, and that dumb soldier played right into my hands." He called to the driver, "Keep traveling, Zinn. But not so fast that we'll attract notice."

"Got to pull up soon," Zinn growled. "Big bunch of cattle crossing the road up ahead."

Della thought, Ike Wallop and the Texans! If I can just manage to get their attention!

"—for an hour or more," Messick was fuming. "Cross to the river and cut south around 'em."

"I don't like this, Messick," the man who had helped tie Della declared. "You told me she was a dance-hall gal, and she ain't no such thing. This is Stitt's daughter. She done me a favor once, wrote a letter."

"Shut up, Jake!" Messick snapped.

"Howdy," a man's voice said alongside the driver, and as the men abruptly ceased their wrangling, Della heard the swish of horse legs through the grass beside the road.

"Warm," Zinn remarked nervously, and Della saw Messick cock his Colt.

"Worse in town," the new arrival said.

Della's heart hit her back teeth. That was Ike Wallop's voice!

"Had to take a team and wagon there to leave," Ike said. "With them buildings cutting off the breeze, it sure is hot. Well, can't poke along with you folks, so *adios*." He bellowed, "So-o-o," his voice already farther away:

I'll sell my outfit fast as I can,
And I won't punch cows for no damn man.

With a desperate heave Della got to her knees, threw herself against Messick who, with gun ready, had been peeking through a slit in the wagon-sheet.

"Damn!" Unintentionally he fired the Colt.

THEN Jake fetched him a clip. But it was only a glancing blow, for the team had panicked and the racing wagon was rocking like a frame shack in a windstorm.

Over and around her the battlers rolled and heaved. Then they stopped. The sweating hulk across her was yanked away. She opened her eyes. Jake was cutting her fetters.

"Best I can do now!" he yelled, and disappeared over the tail-gate.

Then she glimpsed, through the trailing dust, a flash of blue. Climbing over Messick's body she grasped one of the tilts supporting the cover, her eyes poking for distance. The blue was a uniform. A bareheaded soldier on a barebacked mule was following like a glory-bound bat.

She considered jumping, but one look at the flying ground and she threw that thought away. She crawled up front. The driver's seat-mate was gone. In clawing for a hold to keep from falling, she touched the driver. With a yelp he tossed away the lines and dived over the spinning wheel.

Quickly taking his place she looked for the reins, but they were down out of reach on the jouncing double-trees. She got a foot on the brake and shoved, but the squeal of the brake-shoe was the only noticeable effect.

Up ahead Ike was trying desperately to reach the off horse's cheek- piece, but his own pony, crazy with excitement, was fighting its bit and veering away.

Then she saw several cowboys—probably the swing and flank riders of the trail herd—trying to bend them. But to avoid a crash they had to rein aside. Then the wagon was upon the cattle.

Cat-quick, the longhorns opened a path. Then, with an all-together bellow and clash of horns, pounded along with them. It was hell let out for recess.

The left-behind punchers caught up, and with them came O'Dell. Then Ike connected with the tiring team, and slowly the Pueblo-bound cows left the wagon behind.

When it finally came to a halt, the indignant cowmen jerked the bandannas from across their faces to cuss the jughead who had spooked their herd. Their mouths fell open. Their dust-rimmed eyes stood out on stems.

"Ike!" one called. "Miss Kirby done it!"

Still holding the team, Ike turned in the saddle. "I be dogged!"

"Miss Kirby didn't done it." Holstering

his gun, O'Dell moved the fagged mule up beside the nigh front wheel. Dusty, disheveled, dried blood on his lumpy head, he looked like one of hell's home guard. "Miss Kirby was riding with me!"

"She showed poor judgment," Ike growled, leaving the team and siding the off wheel. "Dogged if most of the trouble in this world don't seem to start with a woman. Here I am, peaceable as a church, rambling along by this stranger's wagon just being neighborly. Somebody starts a ruckus inside it and the team hauls out. To keep it from doing what it just done, I haul out after it. Now I find—"

"I'm sorry, Ike," Della broke in, holding her torn dress together at the throat. "I had to come in from the fort, and Mr. O'Dell brought me." Briefly she told what had happened. "Messick, I think is dead," she said. "And the other men are perhaps lying hurt somewhere along the road. I'm obliged to you boys. Now go help the rest with the cows. Mr. O'Dell and I will go on."

"I'll go with 'em," Ike told his *compadres*. "Tell the boss to fire me if he likes."

BY LATE afternoon they were back in town. The wagon, and Messick's body, were turned over to the town marshal. "Please don't neglect your work any more on my account, Ike," Della begged.

"I'm a-going to see you safe back to the fort," Ike insisted, glaring at O'Dell. "Maybe I'll stick around these parts till Comstock shows his hand."

So he rode doggedly by her side of the ambulance with its weary mules and tied-together harness. Now that the scare and excitement were over, Della was worrying again. How to get money to care for the three invalids for an indefinite period! And would Ab want to marry her? Perhaps he'd ask her out of gratitude, or pity, knowing she was homeless as a tumbleweed. But she wanted no marriage without love. Of course Ike was standing by, in case.

Abruptly a mounted soldier rounded the turn ahead, and pulled his trotting charger to a halt. "Miss," he said, touching his cap, "the major sent me to hurry you up. One of those men in the hospital is dying."

Her heart gave one great horrified jump.

"Which one?"

"One that was shot."

"Ab!" She clutched O'Dell's arm. "Could you please hurry?"

But O'Dell had already put the mules into an unwilling gallop, and they arrived before the hospital with a rush. Waiting for no help she sprang over the wheel. The surgeon was in the doorway to greet her.

"Mr. Comstock!" she gasped. "Is he still alive?"

"It's your stepfather," the surgeon said. "He's dying, and asked for you to come here."

"Oh."

FOR a moment she leaned weakly against the doorjamb, then followed the surgeon into a small cubical apparently reserved for those about to cash in. The sickly-sweet smell of death was already there.

Feebly, Stitt beckoned her to his side. "Della," he croaked faintly, "I'm a goner. You've been good to me, and—" He stopped. His mouth fell open. His eyes were staring.

"He's gone," the doctor said. "Fearing you'd not get here in time, he dictated a will of sorts which I took down. It was witnessed by two of the orderlies. It directs that all of the money, a sum of a thousand-odd dollars which you helped to earn, and which is deposited for safekeeping with the owner of the Longhorn Saloon, is to be paid to you. Also, you are to have his tents and other property at the graders' camp back at the railroad."

Stunned like ducks in thunder she took the proffered document, stared for a moment at Stitt, then walked from the hospital room.

"May I see Mr. Comstock?" she asked as the doctor followed.

He nodded. She entered the ward now empty of military patients. Ab and Barney, both swathed in bandages, were sitting up in their beds. Between them stood Ike.

Seeing Della, Ab smiled and raised a hand. "This here bowed-up Texan," he chuckled as she reached his side, "is telling me something that I knew a long time ago."

"What?"

"That I'm a jughead if I don't ask you to marry me. Now he's a odd formation with more curiosity than a wide-awake sheriff. Don't seem to care a hoot for folks' privacy, and claims he won't be satisfied till he knows I done it. Maybe he's got a bet up or something."

Ab winked. Tense as a fiddle-string, Della managed a tight smile as she looked down at him.

"Anyhow," Ab went on, suddenly serious, "I was trying to stiff up my nerve to ask you when old Messick kicked the lid off out yonder. That sort of muddied things up, for now I got no job, and no chance of getting one till I mend up inside. If you wouldn't mind waiting till that time comes, and I corral some money for us—"

"Never mind the money, Ab." She sat on the cot and took his hand. "I'll help you shape up that ranch of yours, and we'll need an old hand like Barney to steer us along when something comes up we can't handle."

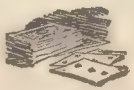
She turned to look up at Ike, but Ike was gone.

Barney was winking rapidly. "The smoke from that damn old cigarette of Ike's got in my eyes," he grumbled at no one in particular.

"Mine, too." Her grip on Ab's hand tightened.

But, rather than tears, Ab had sudden fire in his eyes. And to hell with his wound and Barney's presence. As though a flood of fierce tenderness had been released, he drew her down, and his lips were hot and crushing.

ACE IN THE HOLE



OLD MAN BARNES had a virtual gold mine in his hotel at Keeler, and his skill at the gaming tables. Barnes had a good deal of pride in both possessions. Keeler was at the end of the railway from Reno, the outfitting point for freighters to Darwin and the Panamints, and headquarters for borax miners at Owens Lake. Barnes' place was usually jumping with activity.

Barnes wasn't particularly busy with anything else when 18 year old Rafael Diaz sauntered in and suggested a two-handed game of stud.

Diaz was a born gambler who was playing them close to the belt, which got Barnes' dander up.

"I ain't gonna get beat by no 18 year old kid," he snorted.

Barnes was nearly cleaned, when he caught a strong hand: a full house. Although Diaz had three aces showing, Barnes knew he had him beat with his concealed pair.

"If you can stand the bet, I'll make out a deed for my hotel against what you got in front of you," Barnes sneered at the lad.

Diaz looked long and strong at Barnes' hand, then finally agreed. He shoved in his chips to match the deed to the prosperous hotel. Diaz then turned over his hole card: the fourth ace!

Rafael Diaz nonchalantly took over the hotel, and the next day Barnes got a job driving stage from Keeler to Darwin for sixty dollars a month.

—Bob and Jan Young

The man suddenly lunged at Barney

Parson of Poison Creek

By BUD KIMES

He feared only two things, this preacher; and they were his own two murderous fists!

A HOT WESTERN SUN beat down on Jim Flecher as he accustomed himself to the swaying of the buckboard. Heavy alkali dust filled his nostrils and settled itself on his Eastern clothing. The span of bays trotted on over the ocean of sagebrush which seemed to merge with the distant sky.

As Jim rocked in the spring seat, he turned to look at the driver, Reese Norton. Reese, he judged was a man nearing fifty, his face rugged as granite, his hands hard and calloused. It was an honest face; a face that told Jim the man was filled with a quiet determination.

Norton seemed to feel the gaze for he spoke, for the first time since he'd introduced himself at the train platform where he'd met Jim.

"Bein' a parson in Poison Creek ain't no picnic, young fella," he said. "Least, it wasn't for the last three we had." He paused a moment before continuing, his face set with quiet gravity, his eyes on the dusty road ahead.

"This your first try at it?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Jim. "I'm not an ordained minister, as I told you in my letter, but I got it in me to preach. That's why I answered your ad in the St. Louis *Examiner.*"

A coyote trotted across the road ahead, but Norton paid no heed.

"Poison Creek's a tough place to start," he said slowly, "but if you make good here, you can stay as long as you like."

"Thanks," said Jim. The tension was growing inside him. All the way from the station, he'd been wondering when this man would start to question him—asking him where he'd learned to preach. Or what he'd done before that. Flecher had steeled himself as he thought of the answer he must give. He must disclose that he'd learned what he knew of preaching and the Bible from a kindly minister in the penitentiary, where he'd spent five long years. What would this man say when Jim Flecher told him? He probably should have written that information in his letter inquiring about the parish, but he'd wanted it too desperately. It was the chance he needed to start over—to fade the scars left by his youth and stretch in prison.

REESE started talking again, almost as if he'd read Jim's thoughts.

"Ain't what a man's been that matters out here," he said. "It's what a man proves himself to be." Reese looked out over the desert a moment before he continued. "You ain't always been a religious sort, have you?"

"Why'd you ask that?" asked Jim.

"I don't know," answered Norton. "Maybe it's because we need more than just a parson in Poison Creek. We need a man who can handle himself in tough company. You got a mark or two nature didn't give you, and I was just hopin'—" he paused without finishing.

Jim said nothing. Yes, there had been a day when Jim Flecher could handle himself in tough company—the toughest. It'd all come from "growin' up across the tracks" in a big city. There he'd learned to fight for everything he got—even life itself.

Norton now drove the buckboard out upon a small rise. Below them gleamed a winding silver thread. Around it lay acre upon acre of flat green bottom land. Great cottonwoods stood shoulder to shoulder in even rows like guarding sentinels, and the roofs of the houses and barns peeked from beneath them.

"That's Poison Creek down there," said Norton pointing to the silvery thread. "Town's off to the left."

Norton's hands moved nervously on the reins, as if he was trying to say something and couldn't get started.

"Son," he said, "I'm goin' to give you the layout right now. Guess I should've told you at the station, but it ain't too far back to the Junction and I kind of wanted to show you our valley before you decided. If you decide you don't want to stay, I'll take you back.

"There's mines beyond those buttes over there. Where there's miners there's trouble. Poison Creek ain't the quiet little town it looks like from up here. It's full of hate and greed. There's too much drinkin', too much fightin', too much gamblin'. I ain't one to deny a man his fun, but it goes deeper than that—Poison Creek's downright wicked. Decent women can't even walk the streets without gettin' insulted."

He paused, took off his hat and wiped

the sweat out of the band with his red bandanna.

"Us ranchers figure on stayin' and raisin' some kids. We want a decent place for 'em to grow up in. Church is the best place I can think of. Like I told you, we had three preachers. None of 'em was tough enough to stand the gaff."

Norton started rolling a smoke. He licked it and sealed it, tucked it into his mouth, and offered Jim the makings.

Jim shook his head. Norton continued:

"There's a fella down there by the name of Weitzel, Tod Weitzel. Small shriveled-up man, but mean; mean clear to the bone. He owns the gamblin' and drinkin' joints —and the law. Guess I don't need to add, he hates preachers, and delights in degradin' 'em."

Jim listened, feeling nothing. His eyes were drinking in the cool green beauty before him. The place had a quiet serenity that Jim needed. He could feel it flooding his battered soul.

"He run the first two parsons off easy-like. The third one sided with him, and the ranchers rode him out of town on a rail. That's the gist of it, Mr. Flecher. Which way do I head the team?"

"I'll take my chances," said Jim.

"Weitzel's got a bully workin' for him —that's how he gets around the law. Mixin' with him is rough business. If Weitzel can't get to you no other way, well, you know what to expect."

A cold chill coursed through Jim and he felt the power go out of his arms. They hung like limp ropes at his side. Once they'd held the strength and knowledge to beat any man to a pulp. Now they were lifeless. They'd been that way ever since he'd killed Johnny Siggins in a back-alley brawl. And when he'd seen Johnny lying there dead, the hatred that Jim felt for the whole human race and the strength in his arms had died at once. It was a hatred and a strength that could never be allowed to rise again.

Five years in prison hadn't been half so hard on Flecher as the torture of his unrelenting conscience. In desperation he'd turned to the prison parson and found a ray of hope, but only on the condition that he'd never hate and fight again. For to Jim Flecher fighting and hating were one and the same thing.

THE team started up and wound down the road toward Poison Creek. A cold fear gnawed at Jim's stomach as they rode into the valley.

"You'll live at my house until you find yourself a suitable place," said Norton, pulling the bays to a halt before the huge red barn. Jim looked at the house tucked away among the high trees. It was constructed of rough-hewn logs and spread across the cool green lawn in a peaceful majestic manner. But the sight of the house nestled so comfortably did little to ease the panic which filled him.

"Now's the time to leave," the panic whispered to him. "Go now before you have to face something maybe you're not strong enough to face."

Gripping the seat of the buckboard with all his might, he forced the panic from him. Nothing could ever be settled by running away. He'd have to face it some day, somewhere; and now was as good a time as any. Then softly, as cool water to a thirsting tongue, he felt a calm settle over him and wash him clean. He'd been sent here, not by chance he felt now, but by a Will greater than his and he intended to stay.

Slowly he climbed down from the buckboard, and followed Reese Norton through the front door and into the house.

The heavy heat had not penetrated the thick pine-log walls and the house was cool and welcoming. Bright chintz covered the windows, and the walls and floors had a clean, scrubbed look about them.

Jim heard quick light footsteps coming toward them and then he saw a girl enter the room. The breath caught in his throat. Suddenly he realized he was staring. Her hair was like dark copper, piled high on her head and kept in place by intertwining braids. Her round, firm bosom was clasped tight in her bodice, and her full skirts rustled along the floor. Her

eyes were filled with dancing lights.

"My daughter, Nancy," said Norton. "Mr. Flecher, honey," he finished.

She paused for a second, her eyes surveying him thoughtfully. Then she moved forward, her right hand out, her left hand holding her skirt.

"Welcome to Poison Creek and the Bar T Ranch, Mr. Flecher," she said. Her hand was warm in his and Jim felt a disturbance inside himself.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, hiding his feelings as best he could, but still feeling a flush heating his neck and face. The beauty of this girl standing here, so near him, affected him deeply. On many a night he'd dreamed of such a woman as this while lying on his prison cot, only to awake to the reality of the prison walls.

Suddenly that awakening was with him now. Those grim gray walls were still around him, keeping him apart from a girl such as she. He was an ex-convict and a killer, something that forever would form a barrier to anyone so lovely as this.

The bed that he used that night was too soft and Jim did little but toss and turn. His mind held a muddle of memories, with the girl always there, yet just beyond his reach. He was glad when the night finally began fading into day. He dressed and made his way into the living room. The smells of bacon frying and coffee perking filled his nostrils. Reese Norton stuck his head through the kitchen door and invited Jim in.

"Sleep all right?" asked Norton.

"Not too good," said Jim honestly.

"Maybe too much fresh air?" asked Norton.

"Maybe," said Jim. The remark struck home. No fresh air in prison. He eyed Norton's moving back thoughtfully. Could this man know? It was possible. If he did, now was the time for Jim to come clean; to tell the whole story. He could feel the words forming on his lips, yet they never came out. Somehow he knew it was the wrong time to speak.

"I'll do my chores and we'll head for town," said Norton. "You'll have people to meet."

"Thanks," said Jim. "I'll be lookin' for a place to stay. Can't impose on your hospitality." But he was thinking of the girl. He couldn't take a chance on staying here and falling in love with her. There was too great a chasm between them.

"Might be harder than you think," said Norton. "Weitzel's got the only hotel in town, and I don't reckon you'd want to stay there."

"If it's the only place in town, I may have to," said Jim.

"It's full of wickedness, the worst kind," answered Norton.

"Sounds like a good place for me to start," answered Jim, wondering why he was saying it. The safe place was here with Norton. Preach his sermons on Sunday. Visit his patrons during the week. See Nancy every day. Things would be easy that way.

NORTON, Jim realized, was looking at him thoughtfully.

"You'd be bitin' off a mighty big chunk. Might be bigger than you could chew. Most sinners don't want to be saved. That's why they're sinners."

"I think you're right, Norton," said Jim. "But once in a while, one of 'em hits the end of the line. They come lookin' for a way out. I'd be handy just in case."

"Handy for Weitzel, too," said Norton. "You don't want to be invitin' trouble from him. You'll have it soon enough."

"If I can't handle it the first day, I can't handle it at all," said Jim.

"Sounds like your mind's made up," said Norton. "Well, then, pack your things. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

His things packed, Jim sat in the living room, resting uncomfortably on the huge davenport, deep in thought. He heard her door close and her footsteps go lightly into the kitchen. Sitting quietly, he hoped she wouldn't know he was there. But, as if by instinct, she appeared in the doorway and saw him.

"Planning on leaving so soon?" she asked, her eyes looking over his packed luggage.

"Movin' to town," said Jim.

"Where?" she asked.

"The hotel," said Jim.

"Weitzel's hotel? You couldn't be!"

"Why not?" asked Jim.

"It's — well — it's —" but she couldn't finish.

"Evil?" he asked.

"Evil," she answered flatly.

"You think it might rub off on me?" he asked.

"Oh!" she said disgustedly. "Come in and have a cup of coffee before you leave."

Weitzel's hotel was like all the other wood frame buildings of Poison Creek. The front porch sagged badly and the paint hung in flakes from the half-raw wood.

Norton let Jim out in front and helped him carry his luggage inside. The interior was dark and the furniture looked tired. A sleepy-eyed clerk got up and slowly moved behind the counter.

"I'd like a room with an outside window," said Jim.

"Got a nice room," said the clerk. "Be stayin' long?"

"Quite a while," answered Jim.

"What's your business, mister?" asked the clerk.

"I'm the new preacher," answered Jim. He saw the clerk's mouth drop open. Picking up the pen, he signed the register.

"I've got some things to pick up," said Norton. "Be back in an hour or so."

Jim was unpacking when he heard the knock on his door. It opened and a small, shriveled man stood there.

"I'm Tod Weitzel," he said. "Mind if I come in?"

Without waiting for Jim to answer, he moved into the room and closed the door behind him. He wore heavy glasses and his clothes were overstylish and far too large. A huge gold chain hung across his checkered vest.

"You're the new parson, I understand," he said. There was scorn in his voice, and his face twisted into a slight sneer. "Me, I ain't one much for religion. Figured most parsons are yellow through and through." He paused but Jim said nothing.

Weitzel shrugged and sat down.

"No matter; seems like the people here are dead set on havin' a church. I'm willin', so long as it don't interfere with my business. That's why I came to see you. Get you started off right and we'll both get along. You handle things the way I say and you stay—maybe with a bonus. If you don't foller orders, I'll show these people the color of your hide, just like I did the other three."

"I'm here to preach, not make barbains," said Jim.

"You're askin' for trouble," said Weitzel.

"In what way?" asked Jim.

"I got my methods," said Weitzel.

"So I've heard," said Jim.

"He's a rough one, this boy Barney of mine," said Weitzel. "You should see him in action? Might pay you to watch him, some time. Give you a new slant on things."

Jim felt the cold fear creeping up in him. His arms hung dead, dead from the shoulders down when it came to fighting. Suddenly Jim realized he was afraid. Little beads of sweat began standing out on his forehead.

"You've turned a bit white, Parson," said Weitzel. "I think you understand. No socials, and stay away from the miners. Sunday is your day. Leave the rest of the week to me." Slowly he got up from his chair and headed for the door.

Jim sat still without moving. He knew what he must do. No running, no knuckling under to Weitzel's commands. With his arms dead, he was a coward, yes; but he knew what he must do . . .

JIM preached his first sermon on Sunday and put every bit of feeling he could muster into it. His congregation seemed pleased, for they waited around talking with him, introducing them-

selves. When they'd finally left, Jim saw Nancy standing alone, waiting for him.

"Well done, Parson," she said. "And now, you're coming home to have dinner with Dad and me."

It was a pleasant dinner, and Jim hadn't realized how lonely he'd been for the sight of Nancy until he was sitting across the table from her.

"Heard from Weitzel yet?" asked Norton.

"Instructions all laid out," answered Jim. "Stay away from the miners, and no church socials. I may even get a bonus."

"And if you don't?" asked Nancy.

"A poke in the eye," answered Jim, trying to carry it off on a light note.

"Uh," grunted Norton.

"So, I thought we might have a social next Saturday night," said Jim.

There was a worried look in Nancy's eyes, but Norton's face lighted up with hope.

"Give me a hand?" asked Jim turning to Nancy.

"You really think you dare?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Jim, wondering if he really did. "We'll plaster the town with notices and have a regular box social."

"You got courage, son," said Norton.

For the next week, Jim spent every afternoon and evening with Nancy making arrangements for the social. Driving her home in the twilight, Jim could feel the magic working on him. He strained against love but it was there, like strings drawing him on. He told himself a hundred times he didn't want it to happen but happening it was. On Friday evening they'd been out late. The moon was riding high, and fleecy white clouds moved lazily through the star-studded summer sky.

Somehow Nancy was sitting closer to him tonight than usual, and her closeness swept over him and filled him with panic. As they pulled to a stop beside the ranch house, she leaned against him just a moment and looked up at him. The magic was in her eyes too. Suddenly Jim had his arms around her and was kissing her. Then he was ashamed.

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with stars.

"Sort of sudden, isn't it, Jim," she said. "But that's the way I feel. As if I'd known you forever."

"Nancy," said Jim. "I had no right to do that. I—I—" but he couldn't finish. He was solemn now and he helped her down from the buggy, walked to the house with her. Then without a word, he turned and left her standing there. She was still standing as he'd left her when he turned the buggy around and headed for town.

Pulling in at the livery stable, he gave the rig over to the attendant and walked slowly through the dust toward the hotel. What a fool he'd been! His heart grew sick. The gray prison walls were around him now, closing Nancy out forever.

There was a clamor in Weitzel's Golden Slipper and, just as he came abreast of it, the batwing doors swung wide, spilling stale smoke, yellow light, and men into the street.

A huge man was leading the crowd, rolling up his sleeves, spitting into the dust, and pushing a second man ahead of him.

"So you think Barney cheats at cards, huh?" growled the big man. "By gar, I'll teach you a thing or two!"

With that he turned the man around, put the palm of his hand against the man's face and pushed him backward into the dust.

The man raised to one knee, his eyes on Barney. He was a big man, too, a heavy growth of beard on his face. His heavy boots and clothing were those of a miner.

Accurately he lunged driving his shoulder deep into Barney's midsection. Barney was driven back a few steps. He locked his hands in the man's hair, then started beating his bearded face on an upheld knee. The man tore himself loose.

"Now we fight!" said Barney, his hands doubled into iron fists, his arms extended, his knees relaxed just enough.

Jim stood on the edge of the crowd,

unable to move—held there by a fascination stronger than his will to leave.

Barney circled the man and hit him hard on the side of the head. The miner came back with a kick straight at Barney's groin. The kick missed. Quickly Barney hit the miner again and the second blow staggered his victim. Yet the miner was game and circled Barney carefully. Barney struck again, but the miner dodged the blow, and hit Barney hard on the jaw. Barney only laughed.

"Like a bird he hits," said Barney and flew into the man leaving himself wide open. The miner struck hard and landed two good blows before Barney's rush threw him off balance. Barney's fists belted the man's face. The miner threw up an arm and staggered back. Barney came on. The man sank to the street unconscious.

Barney kicked the miner hard, then again.

BEFORE Jim realized it, he was between Barney and the unconscious miner.

"Don't you think he's had enough?" asked Jim quietly, not fully realizing what he was doing.

"Enough?" shouted Barney. Then his brows drew together. "You don't like the way Barney fights, huh?"

Jim stood frozen to the spot. There was no life in his body.

"Who is the man?" Barney asked the crowd.

"The Parson!" someone offered.

"Parson?" asked Barney. "A parson, huh?" His face showed a touch of fear. He stood undecided for a moment, looking around the crowd. Every eye was upon him. Jim saw him look back at him, knowing Barney was working up the courage to act. Somehow a man of God always affected men like Barney. Made them doubt themselves.

"You want to fight Barney?" he asked.

Jim felt the cold beads breaking out on his forehead. Barney must have sensed his fear, for he broke into loud laughter. He grabbed Jim by the coat front and shoved him into the street over the body of the miner. Barney's laugh grew louder, then suddenly the whole crowd was laughing.

Laughing at Jim Flecher! Mortification filled Jim and fury slowly started to grow in him. The old fury, that burned in him, then suddenly exploded into a red blaze of hate. The crowd had forgotten him and was heading back into the saloon. Murder was in Jim's heart again, the old murder rage as he started to get to his feet. He'd kill Barney, just like he'd killed Johnny Siggins! Suddenly Johnny's dead face was staring at him and the hate died. In its place came a weakness and a trembling. Slowly he got himself erect and picked up the miner. The man was conscious now.

"Thanks, mister," he said. "You took a hell of a chance there."

"Yeah," said Jim.

"They cheated me in that saloon, and I don't like bein' cheated. Maybe I can give you a hand some time. I'm shift foreman at the mine."

"You can," said Jim. "I'm the parson and we're havin' a church social tomorrow night. Why don't you bring some of the boys and come on over."

"I'd like to, Parson," said the miner. "I ain't been in a church since I was a kid, and I sort of get the hankerin' to go now and then."

Slowly Jim went to his room. Mortification still filled him. Word would spread like wildfire. One thing a man had to do was stand up and fight. Anyone who took things lying down, even a parson, was a coward in the eyes of these people. Yet Jim knew he'd done the right thing . . .

THE next evening at the social, Jim felt the full brunt of mortification. People spoke to him with cool formality —those that had come. The evening was flat and Jim could feel it. When he passed, the men looked at their plates, and women looked away.

Nancy and Reese Norton were there, and Jim could see a hurt look in Reese's

eyes. Nancy looked defiant, and was more than kind to him when he settled down to talk with them.

Jim, feeling uncomfortable, was watching out the window and he saw the first flame lick up along the side of the church. Someone was setting the church on fire! In a second he was through that window and after a figure he'd seen dart past.

The man took off down an alley, and Jim could see the burned-out torch in his hand. Jim realized the church was blazing furiously even as he turned into the alley after the disappearing figure. The man hobbled ahead and Jim was suddenly close behind him. The man turned, a gun in his hand.

"Stop or I'll drill you!" said the man, aiming his gun at Jim.

Jim dodged to one side and dived. The gun roared in his ears and the bullet whistled past his head. He bore the man backwards and they went down together. Jim grabbed the man's gun hand and twisted the weapon out of it. Then slowly he got to his feet pulling the man along with him.

Behind him, he heard the sound of running feet.

"You took an awful chance there, son," he heard Norton say. "Lookin' down the barrel of one of them six-shooters ain't healthy. Let's go back to the bonfire and do a little talkin'," he continued, picking up the gun and shoving it into the man's back.

Slowly they moved back through the alley to the burning church. The roof was just caving in as they arrived. The women stood around in awed groups as the men fought with the horses.

"Jim here caught us a skunk," said Norton, shoving the man into the light. "The pole-cat's goin' to tell us all about it." He glared at the fire-bug. "Talk!"

The man said nothing.

"Take off your shoes, mister," said Norton. "Let's see how good you are at fire walkin'."

The man refused to move.

"I said, take 'em off!" roared Norton.

[*Turn page*]

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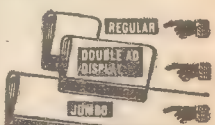

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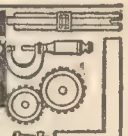

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"I'll—I'll talk," said the man. "Weitzel put me up to it. I lost a lot of money I couldn't pay, while playing poker with him. It was either burn the church down or mix with Barney."

"Let's get Weitzel!" shouted one of the miners.

"Let's go!" chimed in the others.

"Hold it," said Jim quietly. There's law in this state. We'll send for the sheriff and have Weitzel arrested legal-like."

"Take a month to get him in court," said someone. "By that time, he'll have everything fixed."

"We'll have to take that chance," said Jim. "But I don't think Weitzel will get away with this. He's gone one step too far. We'll have church as usual tomorrow. Right here in the street."

Grumbling, the group began breaking up, heading for home. Jim realized he was facing the prisoner, with Norton and Nancy beside him. The girl was standing beside her father, in the ruddy glow of the red-hot coals which had once been the church.

"What're we going to do with this hombre?" asked Norton.

"Turn him over to the city marshal," said Jim.

"Huh!" said Norton. "He'd be out and gone before we got our backs turned. Think I'll just keep him out at my place until the sheriff arrives."

A shot split the night air and the prisoner clutched his chest, then slipped to the ground. Jim felt his hair stand on end. Quickly he turned, searching the darkness that encircled them, but there was nothing.

Norton stood eyeing the fallen man incredulously, the gun hanging limp in his hand. Nancy clutched her Dad's arm desperately.

Jim regained his senses and knelt down over the body. He rolled the man over, but he was beyond help. Jim lifted him and saw he was dying. Bubbles of blood formed with the words that the man tried in vain to utter. Soon he was dead.

"Murder!" said Jim, rising to his feet. "Weitzel's gone too far!" There was a

rage in him now, a quiet rage. Not one of hate, but of righteous indignation. Slowly, he raised himself to his feet, and started up the dark street toward the Golden Slipper.

Nancy, he realized, was clinging to his arm.

"No, Jim, no!" she said. "They'll kill you, too!"

Jim stopped and patted her hand. "Better take her home, Norton," he said.

"Oh Jim! Jim, don't," her voice was pleading and filled with fear. Norton had his arms around her now, pulling her back gently.

JIM walked on up the street, heading straight for Weitzel's place.

Yellow light and tobacco smoke, mingled with jangling music and coarse laughter, drifted out as Jim took the steps and swung through the batwings.

A hush fell over the place as the men looked up and recognized him. Barney was standing in the middle of the floor. When he saw Jim, a broad grin spread over his face.

"Come in to have a little nightcap?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Weitzel," said Jim.

"Now why would you be lookin' for Weitzel?" asked Barney. Barney's legs were spread apart and his thumbs were hooked in his vest pockets.

"There's a matter of my church bein' burned down and a man bein' killed that I'd like to discuss with him."

"Now, Parson, you know Weitzel wouldn't do nothing like that," said Barney.

Jim saw Weitzel slink in the back door and slip into a chair at one of the far poker tables. Jim paid no further heed to Barney and started toward the table.

Barney promptly blocked the way, in a threatening manner. Jim started around him, and as he did, Barney kicked his feet out from under him and Jim hit the floor with a thud. The silence broke and the crowd roared.

Slowly Jim got to his feet, eyeing Bar-

[*Turn page*]

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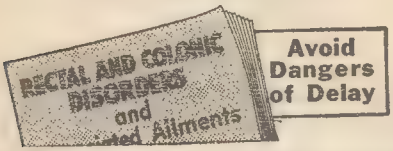

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ney thoughtfully. It was funny the fury wasn't on him now. Instead, he looked at Barney and saw him for what he was —a big bully.

"You ever been whipped?" asked Jim, starting to take off his coat.

"Me?" asked Barney amused. "The man don't live who can whip Barney."

"Maybe he does," said Jim. "And maybe I'm him." He rolled up his coat and laid it on a chair.

Barney's face was filled with amazement. "You mean you're goin' to fight me?"

"Let's put it this way, Barney," said Jim, "—the Lord and I are going to give you the worst whipping you ever got in your life. And when I get through with you, I'm takin' Weitzel to the sheriff."

Barney knew when to strike and he lunged at Jim with all his might. Jim faded to one side and Barney crashed into a table and the group who were sitting around it. Slowly Barney got to his feet. Warily he circled Jim, then lunged but Jim wasn't there and again he fell off balance, and hit against the bar.

The crowd laughed easily now, glad to see things turned against Barney, even if only for this moment. Barney came up furious. He started swinging, leaving himself wide open. Jim parried each of Barney's blows, then lifted him with an uppercut. Barney staggered back blinking his eyes.

"Gar," he said. "You know how to fight!"

He came at Jim again, this time more careful, this time like a trained fighter. He led with his left, feeling, trying to get Jim to open up. But Jim moved around him, countering his blows. Then suddenly Jim slapped him open-handedly on the cheek—a resounding blow.

Barney bellowed like a mad bull and plowed in again, his fists flying. Jim stepped inside, and drove two hard blows straight to Barney's stomach, then slapped him again.

Barney backed away blinking. The crowd was roaring now, pounding their

tables. Barney sidled along the bar, his hand finding an empty bottle that was sitting there. He clutched it, then seemed to hesitate.

"No, by gar," he said setting it back down. "I fight fair."

He circled Jim again eying him thoughtfully. "Where you learn to fight?" he asked.

"In the ring, Barney," Jim said. "Never got whipped in my life."

"You're good," admitted Barney and made another lunge for Jim. But Jim was ready and parried the blow. He crossed with a hard right and clipped

Barney square on the chin. Barney's eyes went blank for a moment. He staggered but maintained his balance somehow.

"Like a mule kicks, you hit," he said. "Maybe we should stop now, huh?"

"It's up to you, Barney," said Jim. "I came in to take Weitzel to the sheriff for burning down my church and killing a man. I'm going to get him, if I have to whip every man in the place."

"I don't like killin' people," said Barney. "You go ahead."

"No you don't!" Weitzel was speaking now, his face white, his hand clutching a gun. "Move one step nearer and I'll plug you!"

"Drop it, Weitzel!" Jim heard Norton's voice ring through the room and realized Reese had been standing at the door all the time.

WEITZEL ducked behind a table and fired. The bullet went past Jim and splatted into the wood behind him.

Reese Norton fired one shot, and Weitzel slid to the floor, the gun slipping from his hand.

"Huh!" grunted Barney, then turned back to Jim. "Maybe I come to church tomorrow, I sing pretty good too."

"Maybe you'll all come," said Jim turn-

[Turn page]

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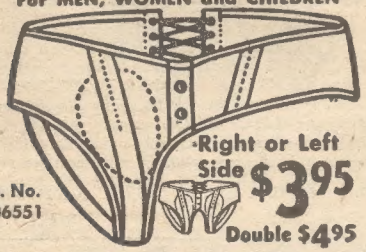

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ing to the room. "I got something sort of special I want you to hear."

"Sure, Parson," they said. "We'll all be there." There was admiration in their voices.

Jim gathered up his coat and headed for the door.

Norton put an arm around him as they went into the night.

"This something special—mind tellin' me what it is?" asked Norton.

"The fact that I spent five years in prison for killing a man in a fight once," said Jim.

"You're no secret to me, Jim Flecher," said Norton. "I followed your ring career for years. You had me kind of wonderin' though, the way you acted last night."

"I was a killer right to the core," said Jim. "Hated people. I hated Barney last night that much and, if I'd started on him, I'd never've stopped. Tonight I saw things right. Got the Lord fighting on my side now instead of the devil. It makes things powerful different."

"Nancy's waitin'," said Norton. "Maybe you'd better tell her what you told me. Take a load off her mind." He paused.

"You see, Jim, I did a stretch once myself and Nancy's maw never seemed to mind."

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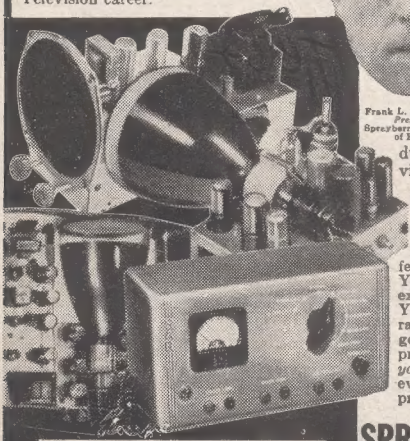

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